

*Travel Series*

# THE NEWAR MERCHANTS IN LHASA



*Kesar Lall*



# **THE NEWAR MERCHANTS IN LHASA**

**Kesar Lall**

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## PREFACE

GROWING up in the 1930's in the heart of old Kathmandu with its narrow streets and spacious courtyards leading from one temple to another, where the merchants with links in Lhasa had their homes, and having neighbours and friends among them, I was fascinated and duly impressed by the lore and legends of Tibet. Many were the tales then told, some of them patently apocryphal, of the long, hazardous travel to Tibet; of the snow and ice and the killer wind; of dizzy heights and endless plains; and at the end of the proverbial rainbow, the pot of gold in Lhasa that awaited the intrepid merchant. The most interesting of these tales were about the adventures of Simhasarathabahu, the first merchant who has since long been deified as Chakandyo; of the exploits of the Tantra master Suratbajra; and of the first ever Newar woman who went to Lhasa alone in disguise in the 1940's to chastise her erring husband. However, unfortunately, not much is known about this most remarkable woman, except for her nickname, Nyasidyo, 'the walking goddess,' and that her husband was a Buddhist priest named Kalyan.

In the beginning of fall, hordes of Tibetans from the border areas of Kuti and Kyirung appeared in the city, driving their sheep and mountain goats, and pitched their tents in the wide open spaces of Tundikhel and at the foot of the sacred hill of Swayambhu. The most memorable sight was a merchant's courtyard in my neighbourhood, to which dozens or more families returned every year and made it their home during the winter. Every evening the courtyard was filled with smoke from the numerous fires in which these wild-looking, hardy folks from the mountains cooked their supper, and

not long afterwards, they took-off their heavy and smelly home-spun woollens to make a bed of the same for themselves, and slept the sleep of the innocent.

Half a century later, when, besides the oral tradition, I tried to lay my hands on published material on travels to Tibet, I found that the first person to write and publish his story was the late Venerable Dharmaloka Mahasthavir. His book in Newari language came out in 1950, the year that proved a watershed in the history of this region. In 1968, the late poet and writer Chittadhar 'Hridaya' wrote **Mimmanahpau**, a fictional account of a journey to, and business in, Lhasa in the form of a letter to his wife in Kathmandu. The book is being translated into English and French. The latest is a narration in 1998 by Nhuchhe Bahadur Bajracharya. I have translated partially or in full five of the travel accounts included in this book from the Newari language, and of two that were published in English, I have taken the liberty of editing. A note on the spelling of place-names; since these Tibetan words were written in Newari, the transliteration into English has not been easy. The spelling of some of them, therefore, may be different from the names to be found in most maps.

Incidentally, the writers of these travel accounts include a *sahu* (merchant); a *banja* (merchant's assistant or petty trader); a merchant whose religious inclination made him don the Buddhist monk's garb and great curiosity made him undertake a long pilgrimage in search of Manjusri, the legendary founder of Nepal, in the mountains of China, so far the only one to do so; a householder, who wished to be instructed in the Buddha's teaching

and followed his *guru* (teacher) to Tibet; and finally a person who was bitten by the travel bug and went “just to have a look at Lhasa” and during a short stay learnt much about Tibet and wrote a long account about the Tibetan way of life, while the others were rather brief and sketchy in their description of their trading and living among the Tibetans. The accounts spanned a whole century, during which Kathmandu lost its ancient and direct trade route to Lhasa with the opening of the Kalimpong road and regained it when the latter was closed in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. It took nearly a month for the traveller in the early days to reach Lhasa on foot and horseback. In 1982, the distance was covered in just three days by car and in 1992, it was done in no time at all in an aeroplane.

Travelling in the early days was quite an adventure. “I found myself alone amidst a chaotic scene, all traces of the trail had been erased,” wrote one traveller, “The land kept sliding and a large rock was poised above ready to tumble down... Then a descent which was the worst of all and I went with a prayer on my lips all the time.” Another wrote of a *sahu* of Chusinsyapala who was found dead on his feet while he was urinating in the snow-bound cold plateau. “We came to a narrow ravine with many twists and turns,” another account ran, “so that the one who went ahead didn’t see those who were behind. The Newar merchants on their way to Lhasa often lost their lives in the ravine. The horsemen said: ‘A merchant of Chusinsyapala was recently murdered by four robbers who were disguised as monks. They carried away all the merchandise on 24 mules that he was bringing from Calcutta’.”

However, upon arriving in Lhasa, they forgot their trials and tribulations. “The houses and



streets reminded them of Kathmandu itself. There was a big *bahi* or *vihara* built by the Nepalese themselves in the central part of the city, which was known as Barkor.”

I owe much to my friends Corneille Jest and Tej R. Kansakar for going through the translation and for their suggestions. I am thankful to the authors and publishers- Ven. Aniruddha Mahasthvir, Nhuchhe Bahadur Bajracharya, Manikratna Kansakar, Harsha Muni Shakya and Kuldharna Ratna Tuladhar- for their kind permission to translate and publish their works. I am most grateful to Buddhi Man Singh Shakya, Harsha Bir Singh Tuladhar, Purna Kaji Tamrakar, Dirgha Man Shrestha, Nhuchhe Bahadur Bajracharya and S.L. Shrestha for their kind permission to use the photographs in their personal collection. Last, but not in the least, I thank my friend, Govind Shrestha, of Ratna Pustak Bhandar, for bringing it out in their travel series.

K. L.

Kathmandu

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# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF A LAMA

Mahapragya

*Mahapragya (Nanikaji Shrestha, 1901-1979) was a Buddhist teacher who began life as a performing artist but under the influence of two remarkable Tibetan lamas who came to Kathmandu, Kyanche Lama and Tshering Norbu, became a monk in circa 1922, for which purpose he paid a brief visit to the border town of Kyirong in Tibet. He was one of the five Buddhist monks who were arrested in Kathmandu in 1924 and upon refusal to give up their religious conviction were expelled from the country. He lived in Tibet from 1927 to 1929.*

*His autobiography in Newari language, edited by Darasha Newami, was brought out in mimeographed form in three parts in 1983, 1989 and 1995 respectively. An excerpt from the autobiography concerning his travels and experiences in Tibet, translated into English, appears in this book.*

## Kyirong

ONE day, very early in the morning, I left my home in Kathmandu. I had a small amount of money, ten Nepalese rupees in addition to 20 Tibetan coins kindly given me by the merchant Dharmaman.<sup>1</sup> I carried on my back a sack containing two pots, one for drinking water and another for cooking rice and a large spoon. I stopped briefly at the village of

Dharmathali<sup>2</sup> for a light breakfast and climbed the hill. I passed through Nyagamani or Panchmane and arrived at Ranipauwa. Then I made a long descent down the Brahmandi hill.

It was beginning to get dark by the time I reached the Tadi river at the bottom of the hill and I kept walking along the sandy bank until I saw a light flickering in the distance. I came to a tent and it occurred to me that I should ask whoever was in it to let me stay overnight. Opening the flap of the tent, to my great relief and surprise, I found my *guru*, Kyanche Lama<sup>3</sup> himself sitting there. He was also surprised by my appearance for he had previously dissuaded me from following him to Tibet. He had told me to stay home and to keep diligently at my self-imposed task of learning about the *dharma*, the teaching of the Buddha.

The *guru* asked me kindly, “Aren’t you tired?”

An acquaintance named Mahachandra, who was also a Newar, was in the tent too. He interpreted for me.

“Guru, I was not even aware that I was walking,” I replied, “So, I didn’t feel tired.”

“Nevertheless you must be tired,” he said, “It took us two days to reach here and you came in one day.”

I kept silent and the lama told his attendants to give me something for supper. And so I became a member of the lama’s entourage.



The road to Kyirong was just as bad as described in the old folksong<sup>4</sup> about an ill-fated couple's pilgrimage to the holy lake Silu or Gosainkund, "The mountains rise high and a river roars below." Words cannot describe it; only a photograph could possibly show how terrible it was. The mountains rose high and seemed to lean towards each other. The Trisuli River made an ominous sound as it flowed swiftly down the canyon and cut the very base of the mountains. The huge scars left by landslides were terrible to behold. Sometimes a tree was uprooted and it fell down the slope, making a resounding noise that made the hair stand on end.

At one place I found myself amidst a chaotic scene, all traces of the trail had been erased. The lama had already gone ahead with the other men, only Mahachandra kept looking back urging me to follow quickly. He warned me that rocks could fall at any moment. I dared not look above nor could I jump from one rock to another. The land kept sliding and a large rock was poised above ready to tumble down. It was with great difficulty that I struggled through the pathless mountain.

I came to another spot where the path lay across an overhanging rock above the swift-flowing waters. While the raging river was visible all the time, my head almost touched the arch formed by the rocks. I managed to hold on to the rocky wall with both hands and made my way gingerly across the narrow stretch. Then came a descent which was the worst of all and I went with a prayer on my lips all the while. The ordeal was finally over when I arrived at the bottom of the mountain.

We slept under the open sky. Only the lama had his small tent. It began to rain at midnight and soon it was snowing. I had only a blanket with me. I was afraid that if it got wet, I wouldn't have anything else to wrap myself with. So, I rolled the blanket into a ball and huddled over it, letting the snow fall upon my back. The blanket got wet anyway and became so heavy that I found it difficult to carry the next morning. If I were to try to dry it, everyone would have been gone by the time it got dry. And I didn't want to travel alone, lest I lost my way in this lonesome place.

I kept going doggedly, but because of the heavy blanket, I failed to keep pace with the group. A recollection of those days covered me with cold sweat even now. There was also a danger of being waylaid by robbers. They dared not attack a large group but spared no single traveller. Three days later we arrived at Kyirong.

In my impatience to turn a new leaf in my life, I pleaded with the lama: "Please make me a monk at once. I have arrived here with great difficulty. Life is uncertain and if I die right now, my wish will not be fulfilled."

The lama only said gently, "Have patience."

I repeated my plea daily and finally on the full moon day <sup>5</sup> in January I was made a novice along with two other Newars, Harsha Dev and Kancha Shakya. Soon after the ordination, Manju Harsha of Bhaktapur arrived at the monastery and begged to be made a novice too.

“If you had come earlier, you could have also been included in the initiation,” the lama told him, “Now, it cannot be done.”

The three of us then went to stay at the monastery of Panshing. Some time later, we received the initiation of *lung* from Sherab Dorje, the lama of Panshing.

Later, the lama sent for us from Samtenling, a big monastery high up in the mountains. The land was covered with snow. It was like walking through a heap of sugar, but at the same time it was very slippery and we often sank deep in the soft snow. The monastery building itself was covered with snow. The lama made us full *gelong* and bestowed on us new names.<sup>6</sup> I was given the name of Palden Sherab. Harsha Dev was named Palden Kherab and Kancha Shakya became Palden Dawa. There too Manju Harsha arrived after the ceremony was over and consequently did not get the initiation.

We returned to Panshing. The cold increased and there was snow everywhere. It was not quite dark even at night. The waterfalls were frozen on the cliffs. There was no water even for a face wash. We could stay no longer at Kyirong and we made our way back to Nepal.

## Gyantse

Soon after the Buddha's birthday in May, 1927, my second Tibetan guru, Tshering Norbu, told me that he would take me to Lhasa to learn more about the *dharma*. Actually I had no desire to travel but I could not speak out my mind. So the lama took me along with him to Bhadrapur in eastern Nepal

where Subba Bihari Lal,<sup>7</sup> a benefactor, was living. He made arrangements for our travel to Lhasa.

From Bhadrapur we went to Kalimpong<sup>8</sup> in India, where another benefactor, *Sahu* Bhaju Ratna,<sup>9</sup> found companions as well as horses for our long journey. We left Kalimpong for Lhasa in the month of June. I had never ridden a horse before.

On the seventh day from Kalimpong, we came to Phari. We stayed with the Newar merchant Chini Kaji. All the Newars in the town came to see us and talked about the recent expulsion of the Buddhist monks from Nepal.<sup>10</sup> On the following day there was a discussion about dharma. There was a merchant named Dasratna,<sup>11</sup> who was also known as Baransahu, and he was very argumentative. He spoke about the Hindu holy men called Bairagya, literally the melancholy ones. I asked him, "Haven't you read any Buddhist scriptures?"

"Why do you ask?" he said.

"Because you are always quoting from the religion of the Hindus," I replied, "You don't mention the Buddha's teaching at all."

On the following day, Dasratna took me to his residence. He gave me something to eat and then he spoke about dharma. But we just scratched at the surface and nothing substantial came up in our discussion.

"You speak mostly about Bhartruhari,"<sup>12</sup> I said to Dasratna, "but you do not mention your own ideas, knowledge and experience. I have not been a monk for long, so I do not know much. However, I'll

tell you something about my experience. I suppose you follow a daily routine of worship and recitation of holy texts. After you have gone through your routine, take a pen and write down whatever comes to your mind – all the good things. When you find you have nothing to write about, just go through what you have written before. See, what you make of it.”

With these words, I left him.

One day I found nearly 200 sheep skins spread out to dry in the sun. I was so shocked that I became sick. Seeing me so upset, a Tibetan inquired, “What has happened to you?”

“Tibet is said to be a holy land,” I said to him, “But there is so much killing here. How can it be a holy land?”

“These sheep were not slaughtered,” he explained, “A storm killed them while they were grazing in the Kalapatang plains. The wind blew them away and piled them up and as a result they died.”

“If the wind can blow away the sheep, doesn’t it blow away men as well?” I asked in great astonishment.

He said: “I have not heard of men being blown off their feet but I have seen people dead standing up or lying about. Only recently a *sahu* of Chusinsyapala<sup>13</sup> was found dead on his feet while he was urinating. So, when you go across the Kalapatang plains, give heed to the horsemen. If you have to urinate, you must not dismount quickly by yourself. Ask the horsemen to help you to get down,



otherwise you might break your legs. You have to be very careful.”

After a few days in Phari, my guru woke me up very early one morning and said, “We must go at once.”

Whenever we stopped, my guru did everything for himself. He did not let me do anything for him. He was a very practical person. He told me that before deciding upon a place to spend the night, it was important to know where water was to be found. It was also necessary to locate a place to relieve oneself. Every day, before setting off on our journey, the guru kindly saw that I was safe and warm on the horse.

Kalapatang was a very extensive plain. The horsemen warned us of sudden storms and they made us go at a fast pace. We found a house in the middle of the plain, where we stopped for a night. The next day we came to the end of the plain.

“One of the joys of a hermit’s life,” explained the lama, “is that he can stop and stay where he liked and eat whenever he felt hungry. There is no one to stop him. There is no one to be sorry for him. All he has to do is to ponder over what he has learnt and be compassionate towards all creatures.” My guru spoke to me about all sorts of things as we travelled along.

We came to a narrow ravine with many twists and turns so that the one who went ahead didn’t see those who were behind. The Newar merchants on their way to Lhasa often lost their lives in the ravine. The horsemen said: “A merchant of

Chusinsyapala was recently murdered by four robbers who were disguised as monks. They carried away all the merchandise on 24 mules that he was bringing from Calcutta.

“Once a Tibetan couple came across some women dressed as nuns, eating their meal. They also stopped to eat. The wife was wearing some ornaments and the women became friendly with her, sharing their food with her. After they had eaten, they urged the wife to go with them. They told her husband, “We’ll move on, please come along.” The man thought that his wife was in good company. He took time to eat and drink his beer. The women took a wrong turn intentionally and stopped behind a large rock where no one could see them. Then they strangled the poor wife and robbed her of the ornaments and disappeared. The husband found her with a twisted neck on the following day.”

I heaved a sigh of relief when we emerged from the ravine and arrived at the lodging for the night.

We soon came to a lake called Pyete. It was very big and it took us a whole day to walk along the shore. I saw what looked like rocks that shone brightly. I asked a companion. “What kind of rock is this?”

“It is ice,” he said, “It came from the lake itself. When it is very cold, a layer of ice, as deep as a cubit and a half, forms over the lake. Then, it is not necessary to walk along the shore. Men and animals could just walk across the lake. But after mid January, the wind begins to blow. The ice cracks and

forms blocks, big and small, to be driven here and there by the wind.”

Five days after leaving Phari, we reached Gyantse. We stayed with the merchants of Chusinsyapala. Meanwhile, a nun from the lama's district came and stayed with us. When I saw her taking meat, I found it disagreeable and I took leave of my guru and accompanied two merchants, one named Ashyan and the other Ashamadu, to Lhasa. The merchants took great care of me and I reached Lhasa as comfortably as possible on the ninth day after leaving Gyantse.

## Lhasa

Jog Narayan, a sahu from Sankhu<sup>14</sup> in Kathmandu valley, had a great reputation in Lhasa. He welcomed me and I stayed at his place for some months.

One day another merchant named Kul Ratna Dhakhwa saw me in the market place and he asked me in. He took me upstairs to his room, where I found a harmonium and a pair of *tabla* drums as well as a copy of my own book of Buddhist hymns.

“Guru,” said the sahu, “I do not know how to render the hymns properly. If you would kindly teach me, I would be able to sing too.”

“I am a monk now,” I replied, “I must not indulge in singing.”

“What is wrong in singing Buddhist hymns?” he questioned me. “Everyone sings. If you

do not teach, how can others learn to sing these hymns?"

In the meanwhile other men also came there. In one corner of the room, supper was prepared, and I was obliged to sing until it was quite late in the night. My host sent someone to fetch me. The fellow however didn't say anything to me; he just stayed there and listened to the songs. Someone else then came and he too stayed behind.

At about midnight, I said, "I must go now."

All the merchants escorted me to my place. They had a gas light with them. My host was already asleep. I went up quietly and slept.

The next morning the merchant didn't speak to me; he was really annoyed. Later in the day, he spoke gruffly, "Where did you stay so late yesterday?" When I told him what had happened, he asked, "Did they feed you?"

I said to myself, "So I must not go anywhere because this merchant is providing me with food and lodging!" I had no longer a wish to stay at his place.

One day I received an invitation from another influential merchant, Bhaju Krishna. I was in a fix. It did not behoove me to go about singing even hymns praising the Buddha. But I had already made a mistake and I didn't want to repeat it. I thought of a strategy. I had heard that this merchant had a copy of Nistananda's *Lalitavistara*.<sup>15</sup> If I asked him for it, I thought, he would be unwilling to part with the rather rare book and then I would have an excuse not to sing for him. But Bhaju Krishna Sahu said I could

have the book and I was obliged to go and sing. He invited all the merchants along with their families. A special seat was set aside for me and dinner was served to everybody. The house resounded with Buddhist hymns until midnight and I was richer with a copy of Lalitavistara.

I no longer had a wish to stay on in Lhasa. Some people suggested that I should visit the trade fair at Champaling.<sup>16</sup>

## **Champaling**

I joined a caravan for Champaling. There were merchants in it, and everyone rode horseback. As we went along, I found men and women standing on the road. They often blocked our way and crowded around me wishing to be blessed, for they took me to be a learned lama. Some even asked me to tell their fortune. When I professed my ignorance about fortune-telling, they just repeated, "Please, please."

Something had to be done to satisfy these simple people. I prayed to the Buddha and took hold of my rosary with both hands. And then I began separating the beads by fours with both hands, and at the very last separation, if there remained four beads, I said, "Yes, success will come, but slowly." If there were only three beads, I said, "Don't expect too much." When only two beads remained, I said, "You will succeed. Don't worry." If only one bead was left, I said, "No use, it is hopeless." Many went away pleased with my fortune-telling.

We came to the Tsangpo river soon after leaving Lhasa. We had to ride in a coracle to cross



the river. The hide became soft in course of time and when the coracle came into contact with ice floes that were sharp and keen as cut glass, holes were made and water seeped into it. The boatmen applied a lump of butter to the hole to stop the water. After a while, when the butter melted, the men placed a wooden cup upside down to plug the hole and put their feet over it. Later on, I was to learn much about the perils of crossing the river in a coracle.

On the other side of the Tsangpo, we came across ice fields. It was impossible to have a fire going during the night. When the snow was new, it was fluffy and looked like sugar. If one fell down, one sank deep in it. But before long, the snow turned into ice and became hard and slippery like stone.

One day we climbed up a mountain so steep that our nose seemed to brush against the wall of ice. As I was not yet used to riding, I nearly had a fall when the belt came loose and the saddle slipped off. I reached out for the rocks and fortunately the horse stood still. The groom hastened to my rescue; he tightened the belt and made the saddle firm.

My horse was small but I didn't ride properly and it didn't appreciate me on its back and often became listless. It must have asked itself, what kind of a man was on its back? Once it became so confused that it turned around abruptly and raced back to the stable. I was no less confused for all my companions had gone ahead. If I had not ducked quickly, my head would have struck hard against a beam and I would have hurt myself badly. I just stayed at the stable until someone came back to look for me. Another horse was provided to me and we continued on our journey.

All the men in the caravan were non-vegetarians. One of them rode ahead and made an arrangement to have a sheep slaughtered at the lodging for the night. They had a very good supper but I feared that if I kept company with them for long, I too might be tempted to eat meat

We reached the Brahmaputra river in four days from Lhasa. We learnt that 18 coracles had sunk in the river not long ago and there were two left and the two had a very busy time. We had to wait for three days for our turn to cross the river. The coracles were very light and two of them were tied together so that the wind did not toss them about like paper boats. Along with the passengers, goods and animals were put into the two coracles. If one coracle leaked and the boatmen found it impossible to save it, the rope that bound it was cut and the leaking vessel sent drifting down the Brahmaputra along with the men and animals to a certain death. If anyone in the doomed boat tried to hold onto the other coracle, blows rained mercilessly on the hand until he had to give up. How many lives must have been lost in the 18 coracles that sank in the Brahmaputra!

Great heaps of sand dotted the riverside. Violent storms often swept the sand clean, only to be heaped elsewhere. After three idle days in a tent, we had the coracles and it took us two hours to get to the other side. But before we landed a strong wind made the boatmen hurriedly throw a rope across a narrow strip of water. A man on the shore caught the rope and tied the boat securely to a large wooden stake driven onto the ground. What a relief it was to stand on firm land once more!

We arrived at a village before long and spent the night there.

The next day we arrived at our destination-Champaling or, as the Tibetans called it, Jampaling, after the image of the Buddha of the future, Maitreya,<sup>17</sup> housed in the monastery there. As soon as we reached there, we went up the monastery and paid our homage to the Buddha.

The fair was held in the grounds around the monastery. It was indeed a great fair. Everything conceivably needed in Tibet including precious stones and the most expensive cloths of gold and silver and silk were on sale. I wished to buy a cap for myself. So I said to the merchant to whom I had entrusted my money for safekeeping: "There is a cap that seems to be very warm. I would like to buy it."

"That won't do for you," said the man, "It is a cap for nuns, not for men."

I regretted that I had given my money to the wrong person. I wondered whether he would return it to me at all and I was sad. Sometimes, even in the life of a monk, lack of insight created great uneasiness. I had 40 Indian rupees with me when I reached Lhasa. I was afraid that people might see my money, that I might lose it or that someone would steal or borrow it from me. I often checked to see that it was still with me and I was always tense because of it. Finally, I decided that I wouldn't go hungry even if I didn't have the money, because there were kind people who were looking after me. So, I had said to this merchant: "Please keep this money for me. I'll ask for it when I need it." I was relieved, as if I had just washed the mud off my feet. It then occurred to me

that while I was wearing a good suit, I had been carrying an old, torn garment for possible use in the future.

But now at Champaling, Mara<sup>18</sup> the Satan in Buddhist mythology, stirred within me and I began to have suspicion of the merchant who had my money. I was much troubled and I could not think of anything else. I could not even sleep at night. In my desperation, I awoke a Tibetan and sent him to fetch the merchant to me. The merchant came and I said to him: "I am not going to ask you to return my money. It is all yours now."

"Guru," said the merchant, "What a strange thing to say at this hour of night! It seems you are angry with me. What has happened, Guru?"

"No, Sahu, I have not said it in anger," I replied, "It has occurred to me that the very idea of me and mine is an arrow stuck to one's body. Therefore, I have made up my mind to give up the money. Now, you have nothing with you that belonged to me. You may do as you please with the money I gave you."

The man thought it was very strange of me to behave in this manner and he went away. Only then there was peace in my mind and I was able to sleep.

I was given a place of honour in the lodging by Jog Narayan, the same merchant who had been my host in Lhasa. He played a good host to all at Champaling too. As meat and wine were highly valued in Tibet, I said to the merchant one day, "If you will permit me, I would like to say something."

“I know you won’t say anything that is improper,” said the good merchant, “Please tell me what is in your mind.”

“There is a god called Karunamaya<sup>19</sup> in heaven,” I told him, “Since he provides all the gods with whatever they need, he is held in great honor. However, would it look nice if a decaying leaf is stuck to the diadem on his brow?”

“No, it won’t,” the man agreed.

“Likewise,” I continued the parable, “you are a Karunamaya too. You provide everyone with their needs and look after their comforts. However, just like the decaying leaf on Karunamaya’s diadem, the beer on your moustache is unbecoming of you. You are presiding over an assembly of merchants here. You give them advice on their business and you give them whatever they need. Like Karunamaya seated high among all the gods, here you are high among all men. Therefore, the beer on your moustache does not become you. Besides, there is a monk with you. He is a member of the Buddha’s Brotherhood.<sup>20</sup> Drinking beer in the presence of the monk, who does not drink, does not become of a man of your stature. You can think of it for yourself.”

The merchant was ashamed at my words. He realised that it was wrong of him to drink. “Your example has hit me hard,” he said, “You have given me good advice at the right time. Your wisdom is great. From now on, I will give up drinking. Please excuse me for my lapse today.”

It was good that Jog Narayan Sahu actually gave up drinks from that day.

The fair was over and we made preparations for the return journey to Lhasa.

## Samye

We crossed the Brahmaputra again and after a day-long ride along the river we arrived at Samye with its unique monastery, which in ancient times was the home of the king among the giants,<sup>21</sup> who was also a great wizard. The Tibetans spoke of the building as *chikila cikpa mepa, gnalola kawa mepa*. It meant, "no walls on the outside and no pillars inside." When Padmasambhava<sup>22</sup> arrived in Tibet, he heard of the giant king and he came to this place.

The giant looked at Padmasambhava with big, fierce eyes. When Padmasambhava returned his gaze, the giant furrowed his brow, squinted his eyes and gnashed his teeth. Padmasambhava did likewise. Then the giant asked in great anger, "Who are you to challenge me in my own castle instead of paying respects to me?"

"I am a guest here," replied Padmasambhava, "It is you who ought to receive me with respect. Who are you to stare at me instead of welcoming me?"

"Don't play a great man in my presence," said the giant, "You don't know me yet."

"If you were a great being, you would show it by receiving me with respect," retorted Padmasambhava. "Now you had better stop your nonsense."

At this the giant burst out in great anger, "Will you pay your respect to me or not?"

Padmasambhava then raised both hands and with his head held low, he said, "*Thubje che* (thank you)." As soon as he uttered the words, a deadly ray issuing from his fingers burned the giant into cinders. Seeing the plight of their chief, the giants were terrified and submitted themselves to Padmasambhava, who in no time turned them into gentle folk with the compassionate teaching of the Buddha.

The monastery at Samye had a secret grave behind seven doors, all of which were locked and to which no keys were available. None but the Dalai Lama may enter the secret chamber once in a lifetime and for him there was no need of the keys to open the locks. The doors opened automatically when he walked in and they were locked again when he came out. Within six months of his entry in the grave, the Dalai Lama himself breathed his last.

There was another monastery not far from this place, which contained a large collection of old weapons, including two swords nine cubits long. There were also many *thanka*.

Half a day's ride up on a bare mountain from the second monastery we came to a place called Chinku. There were many caves in the mountain and we found some monks living in them. "If you have any match, you can give it to us," they said, "That's the only thing we can use here."

We continued on our journey towards Lhasa and one afternoon we arrived at a house in a verv

lonesome place. There was no space for us in the house. So, the goods bought at the fair were placed all around with a space in the center, where we could sleep at night. After supper, we heard dogs barking in the distance just as were about to drop off to sleep. The merchants were very alarmed and they said: "The robbers are coming! We must load our guns."

They loaded their guns and waited. For a while there was silence and then the dogs barked in another direction. Before long a man on horseback appeared in the dark. Our men took him for a robber and they were going to shoot him down. In the nick of time the man stopped the horse and called aloud. He was none other than our host. If he had not shouted, he would have met his end! It was a terrible thought. Everybody gathered around him in great relief and offered him delicacies to eat.

The next day we rode our horses across a snow-covered plain. In the mountain slope ahead of us, we saw a herd of about 200 musk deer. From a distance the deer appeared like lambs as they jumped and skipped among the rocks.

The merchant Jog Narayan took out his gun and aimed it at the deer. "Sahu, please do not kill the animals," I pleaded with him. "They are living peacefully and happily. It is not good to kill innocent creatures."

The man however did not heed me; he kept the gun pointed towards the musk deer. The only thing I could do then was to race my horse towards the merchant and shout at the same time, "For Heaven's sake, Sahu, don't shoot. It is a sin to kill."



When I reached him, I raised myself on the saddle and tried to take the gun away from his hand. In the process, the gun went off and the deer ran up the mountain in a long line.

The merchant was not pleased. He said angrily, "You have not done good by spoiling a golden chance."

"Sahu, you are a wise man," I told him, "Tell me, is there any creature who would like to die?"

"Of course, not," replied the sahu.

"Isn't it a sin to kill a creature that is not willing to die?" I asked.

"Oh, Guru, if we are to speak of sin, there won't be many things that can be done," he replied.

I said: "No, Sahu, whether any creature on earth enjoys peace and happiness is the result of its past deeds. The way you behave would also produce the same result. Do you like to suffer the consequence of a bad deed? Ask yourself. Think about it."

The merchant was angry with me for some time. Then, he cooled down and said: "Oh, Guru, you have compassion not only for the deer but for me too. There is a great deal of ignorance in the world. Everyone knows that one has to suffer the consequence of one's actions. Yet, how one is apt to forget it! You have done me a great favour today. I was going to commit a great sin in my ignorance. You have saved me. You have made it all clear to me

now. You have shown me the light. May I never be in the dark from now on! In future, I will never take the life of any creature.”

With these words Jog Narayan Sahu bowed reverently.



Once we arrived at a narrow ravine, which came to an end in an amphitheatre. A great waterfall tumbled down from a great height and created a pool in which the water foamed furiously. The horses went through the pool without hesitation but I was afraid and tried to stop my horse. Nevertheless, it plunged into the water and in my helplessness, I pulled up the bridle and stretched my legs. As a result the horse slipped and I also went down with it. In desperation, I held on to the wooden saddle in the front and the back with all my strength. The horse got up with a mighty struggle and reached the end of the pool with me still on its back.

To my great sorrow I discovered that the horse had gone lame in one leg. The horse looked at me pitifully and it occurred to me that, regardless of its plight and pain, it was asking if it had been difficult for me. I patted and gently rubbed its back in thankfulness. Thereafter, whenever we had to cross a wide ditch, the horse stopped briefly as if to warn me to keep steady. Then, I took hold of the saddle firmly with both hands in the front and behind and made my legs firm on the stirrup. The horse then jumped across the ditch. The behaviour of the horse<sup>23</sup> made me think of it as a divinity come to help me.

On the last day of our journey, we had to cross the Tsangpo. So, I had to part with my good horse. I rubbed it gently, recited a hymn and walked away sorrowfully.

Once more I was in Lhasa. One day I said to my good host, "Sahu, I am wasting my time. I should be staying in a monastery to learn more about the dharma.

### **In a Monastery near Lhasa**

Jog Narayan Sahu arranged my admission to the monastery called Kaincasyar. He provided me with bedding and food and a *gelong* was found to prepare meals for me. The chief lama of the monastery was a pupil of the famous Phorankha Rimpoche. He was a master of logic and he gave me the text entitled Lamahring to study.

The *gelong* came in the morning and prepared tea for me. One day he came at about 10 A.M. and finding the kettle empty, he was very upset. With a long face, he said to me: "So, you have consumed a whole kettle of tea! I cannot make tea for you any more."

However, he made the tea and left the pot on the brazier. I was very sad and tears came to my eyes. The *gelong* returned in the afternoon and seeing the pot full of tea, he was angry with me again. "Why didn't you drink the tea?" he said gruffly. He was supposed to work for me but he made me serve him. One day, he gave me a copper pitcher and said, "Fetch water from the spring."

I had to go down the hill and then make a stiff ascent to reach the spring. The track was perilous. As I made my way slowly I could not control my tears. I tried to reassure myself with the thought: "I have come to study and I must not mind the trouble nor think ill of the gelong." The spring was shallow and the pitcher had to be filled slowly with spoonfuls of water. It took a long time to fill the pitcher and I carried it on my back with the help of a thong over my shoulder. When I returned, the gelong lashed out at me, "Why did you take a whole day to fetch the water?" I could not endure it any longer; I went to my room and gave way to my tears.

One day I came to a pleasant spot on the top of the mountain. As I contemplated the scene, I thought of the guru Jetsun Milarepa.<sup>24</sup> I had read his biography and I recalled his labour, sacrifice and willpower. It gave me some comfort and encouragement as well in my own efforts to continue with my study.

It then occurred to me that I should make an image of the great guru. I gathered some nice stones for the purpose and decided to return the next day to make a small shrine. As I was digging the ground, a *gese* arrived there and asked me mockingly, "Palden Sherab, I know you don't take meat, but do you eat worms?"

"When did I take worms?" I asked in some surprise.

"Why are you digging then?" said the *gese*, "You are a gelong, aren't you?"

“I am not digging here to find something to eat,” I explained to him, “I am only going to make a shrine to guru Jetsun Milarepa. How can I be looking for worms to eat?”

“Whether you make a house or a shrine,” the gese retorted, “you are surely causing the death of many worms by digging up the earth.”

“Gesela, if it is so,” I replied, “there are many monasteries in Tibet, Sera with 9,000 monks, Drepung with 7,000 and Ganden with 5,000. How many worms must have died when these monasteries were built?”

“We didn’t build these monasteries ourselves,” reasoned the gese. “These were built by workers. How can we be held responsible for the death of the worms?”

“Whether in religion or in politics,” I said, “those who make others do something bad are held responsible and they are punished more than those who actually do it.”

The gese went away in great anger and reported to my guru that Palden Sherab did not pay him the slightest respect but engaged with him in a hot discussion. The teacher sent him back to fetch me. He was very pleased that now I would get my deserve. He came, scowled at me and said, “Teacher has asked you to come to him at once.”

I washed my hands and came down the mountain. When a lama became angry, he often beat a student very severely. So, it was with some

trepidation that I stood outside the door and announced myself.

“Come in,” the teacher said.

I went in, paid him my respects and stood aside quietly.

“Sit down,” said the teacher, “What did you say to the gese?”

“I only gave answers to his questions, Guru,” I replied.

“He is a great scholar,” said the teacher, “It is not good to argue with such a great man.”

“Great scholars would not go about kicking dogs in the street,” I said, “It is only small children who do so. I am also like an ignorant dog. The dog does not know a great scholar. When it is kicked at without any cause, it would snap at him. Teacher, please pardon me.”

The teacher then called the gese and said to him” “Gesela, as a great scholar, you ought not to poke your nose at other people’s business without any reason at all. You went to the place where the Newar was working and provoked him. Is that true?”

The man was speechless. The teacher then said to him, “Learn to behave like a scholar; don’t be a child.”

I knew the teacher was not happy with me either. He liked the taste of meat and I never ate it. So, he had often said to me: “Gelong, you are far

beyond us. We eat meat and we don't know when we are going to be liberated." But when the gese complained to him about me, he had to be impartial in his judgement and he spoke in my favour.



I continued my study under the guru. Whenever I felt restless and had nothing else to do, I wrote down my thoughts on a piece of paper, and in course of time I produced a *mandala* or diagram. My unhappy gelong thought that I was wasting my time and he informed the teacher, who asked me, "Palden Sherab, is it true that you are drawing pictures instead of devoting yourself to your study?"

"Yes," I confessed.

"Well, let me see what you have drawn then," said the teacher, "Bring it to me."

I was afraid what the teacher would think when he saw my *mandala*. Unsure of myself, I took it to him. He looked at it with deep interest and after a long while, he asked, "Where did you copy it from?"

"Teacher," I explained, "I did not copy it from anything. I made it myself from what I have learnt from my teachers."

"But you must have a good reason for it. What do you mean by it?"

"I have no special reason for it, Teacher. I have merely made use of a piece of waste paper to put down my thoughts so that it will help me to remember the dharma."

“Anyway, explain it to me. I would like to hear you.”

Faced with great difficulty, I kept looking in silence.

“Don’t feel shy,” said the teacher, “It is good that you could put down on paper what is in your mind. It must have a good meaning. I would like to hear it.”

“Teacher, how can I dare to speak to you about it?”

“Don’t be afraid.”

So I was compelled to explain my mandala. But before beginning to speak about it, I made a plea, “Please pardon me if I have made a mistake.” And so I began..... “Although religion, knowledge and wisdom are widespread throughout the world, ignorance and illusion are also prevalent everywhere. In the middle of the mandala I have a black space to indicate anger, greed, lust, etc.

“A human being may play a dual role, for his life is like a double-edged blade that can cut either way. Man can reach the higher spheres or go down to the nether regions. The man who is inclined downwards loses himself in his own lust and suffers unknowingly. Such is the result of the indulgence of the senses. He delights in his own suffering. A dog tastes its own blood when it gnaws a bone. Likewise, a man in his younger days finds attraction in women.”



“When a child is born to him, the man behaves like a spider, who gets entangled in the threads of his own making. He finds himself very busy in family affairs. When a second child is born, he is consumed by his own children. In other words, his life is spent in the care of his offspring. The crab may sport in the water but when someone comes along, it hides under a stone. In the same way, a family man conceals himself in his room whenever a holy man or teacher appears.

“In the end, when the man finds himself in his deathbed, he regrets that he has not achieved anything of worth during his lifetime. He wonders where he will find himself after life. He sees no hope and he dies with sorrow in his heart. He is reborn, according to his deeds, in one of the six worlds inhabited by gods, demons, men, semi-gods, ghost or in hell. Because he has not been able to free himself from the vicious circle of birth and death, he forever wanders about in suffering.

“If a man desires to avoid suffering, he will seek the Light. For knowledge and insight, he will seek the company of holy, wise men. He will become wise himself and he will seek the solitude of the forest and he will contemplate and meditate. He will first become clean of his sins. Then his mind will become pure and steady. He will gain wisdom. He will have a clear insight and he will see himself in every creature. Thereafter, he will wander from one place to another to help pious people to quench their thirst for knowledge and wisdom. So, he benefits many people by his example and precept. At the end of his life, he will be happy that he will attain *nirvana*. I have tried to depict this idea in my drawing.”

My teacher was very pleased and he endorsed my view by putting down his own name in a corner of the drawing. He said further, "Show it to the Newars in the bazar and explain it to them."

The next day I went down to the city. I saw my benefactor in his shop and I showed my mandala to him and others who were there. Seeing my teacher's name in it, some Tibetans put it to their head with great reverence. Impressed by the respect with which the drawing was received by the people, I took it to Nati the photographer at Manegyap and had it photographed. Nati made a number of prints in large and small sizes and displayed them in his shop. The prints were purchased right away by Newars and Tibetans alike. Some Tibetans put it as an amulet around their neck.

My teacher provided me with a special seat of honour whenever I visited him. One day, he said to me: "Palden Sherab, whenever you preach the dharma, if anyone wishes to become a monk, you may give him the initiation. Here, I will give you a certificate of your competence to do so. If anyone questions you, show it to him."

With these kind words, he gave me a certificate of my proficiency in the matter. Thereafter, whenever I visited a monastery, the gelong gave me a seat of honour. When I protested that I was just a beginner and do not deserve the honour, they said, "Gesala, if it is so, why did the great Teacher of Logic of Kaincasyar monastery give you the certificate?" The practice of *pho* or *ulkanti*, which I had learnt earlier from my other teacher Tshering Norbu also gave a good impression to the

people about me. I stayed in a cave behind the Kaincasyar monastery preoccupied with my meditation.

One evening, at the end of a meditation session, I opened my eyes and found, to my great surprise, the deity Meghasamvara<sup>25</sup> looking intently at me. I was very scared. I felt my head getting bigger and my body swelling. In haste, I closed my eyes. When I opened my eyes after a while, Meghasamvara was still there. As I was about to close my eyes for the second time, he opened his mouth wide and within it, I saw the image of a very peaceful Buddha Shakyamuni. Thereafter, the deity vanished and that scared me even more. I couldn't stay there any longer. I felt as if someone was going to seize me and I got up slowly from my seat.

It was getting dark. I felt as if someone, perhaps Meghasamvara himself, was coming stealthily behind me. With many a backward glance, I reached my lodging. But I dared not stay alone in my room; it all seemed very strange and foreboding. The lamas did not come out after dark and I was at a loss. Despite my fear I remained outside the house.

As a result of my sojourn in the cave, spending hour after hour seated on a cushion of grass. I was afflicted with rheumatism. My hands and legs became useless. Hearing of my plight, my kind host in Lhasa, Jog Narayan, came and took me back to his own place in the city. He called a doctor, who prescribed a medicine that had to be taken with a soup containing meat.

“Now, there is a problem,” the merchant told the doctor, “The monk does not take meat. What shall we do?”

“If he does not take meat,” said the doctor, “I cannot treat him.”

With these words, he went away.

My host was in a fix. He said to me: “What shall we do now, Guru? You will have to take meat.”

“Well, this body has to come to an end some day,” I said, “But I will not take the meat of another creature for my own benefit.”

By a mere chance, Kulman Singh, a nephew of a physician named Kaji Vaidya, came to the house and the merchant said to him: “You are also a physician. Our guru is suffering from rheumatism. Please see what you can do for him.”

Kulman Singh promised to come later with his medicine. “But if your medicine has to be taken with a soup of meat, he won’t take it, “ warned my benefactor.

“There is no need to take meat with my medicine,” said Kulman Singh.

The physician returned soon with his medicine. For two months he came twice daily and rubbed his healing oil upon the rheumatoid parts of my body. Finally I was able to walk and I went around the Barkor. I repaid the physician for his kindness by speaking about the dharma, in which he took a deep interest. Eventually Kulman Singh

renounced the householder's life. He had a Tibetan wife.

I accompanied Kulman Singh to the monastery of the reincarnate lama, Phorankha Rimpoche, and he was ordained a gelong and given the name of Thinle Tsuthim. In Sanskrit, the name meant Karmashila. We returned in the company of another Newar monk named Mahavirya and stayed overnight with the merchant Ashakaji Dhakhwa in Lhasa. The next day we left the city for Shigatse.

## Shigatse

As we were marching across a lonesome expanse, we saw three men coming from the opposite direction. Their clothes and the ropes and knives they carried in their hands were stained with blood.

Karmashila said to me, "Look, Guru, here come our saviours."

We were very afraid. We put down our loads and began praying to the gods. We lost all hope for ourselves when the men came quite close. We believed our last moment had come and there was nothing we could do but to close our eyes and keep praying. We thought the men would tie us with their ropes before dispatching us. But nothing happened and when we opened our eyes the three men had gone far away. Only then were we able to take a long-drawn sigh of relief. "God has saved us," we said to ourselves and we picked up our loads and resumed our journey.

As I had just recovered from rheumatism, Karmashila took pity upon me and he prevailed upon

a man who came riding to let me ride a second horse he was taking along with him. That evening, we found lodging in a house where we were treated kindly as guests. That day happened to be Monlam, a Tibetan festival, and we were given seats in front of an altar decorated with special sweets. When I took a piece of the sweets and ate it, Karmashila warned me, "That's not for eating." Then, I heard the titter of the girls there and the old couple, our hosts, told them to be quiet. I was ashamed of myself.

The next day we found ourselves in a soldier's house. Our host was curious about us and asked, "Why did you leave Lhasa during the Monlam?"

We explained to him: "We are Nepalese, not Tibetans. Moreover, we are monks not attached to any monastery. We are on a pilgrimage and so we cannot care for the festival."

"Please don't mind it, but I'll have to check with my officer," said the soldier.

For the next three days, we stayed in the soldier's house as his guests. On the fourth day, we resumed the journey.

We arrived in the town of Shigatse on the eighteenth day after our departure from Lhasa. The merchants of Ghorasyapala welcomed us and we stayed with the merchant Bhikshu Bir Singh. At a distance of some ten miles from the town, there lived a nun all alone by herself. After some days at Shigatse, our host took us to a cave in the mountain above the place where the nun lived. We decided to spend some time in the cave.

We often went down to the town with our begging bowl. We walked along the street, reciting a prayer, and whatever we received in alms, we left with our benefactors, the merchants of Ghorasyapala, and they supplied us with tea, tsampa or barley flour, butter, etc.

“This is a good place for the purpose of meditation,” said Karmashila and Mahavirya to me one day, “If you would kindly teach us, we would like to spend some time in meditation.”

“You have to follow the instruction strictly,” I warned them.

“We will do that,” both of them said.

“If you will follow my instruction, draw some blood from your chest and write down certain words with the blood. Then make a small *stúpa* and place the *mantra* inside it. After that, I’ll instruct you on the methods of meditation.”

Both of them kept quiet. At last Karmashila said, “Guru, can you do so?”

I made a small cut on my chest with a blade. With the blood I wrote down the *mantra* on a small piece of paper. Seeing that I have drawn my own blood, the two gelongs went away separately and with their blood, they wrote the *mantra* and brought the same to me. Then they made two small *stupa* with their own hands. I made two clay figures of Bajrajogini<sup>26</sup> with the paper containing the *mantra* inside them and placed these in the two *stupa*. To consecrate the *stupa*, we invited an old incarnate

lama. A large number of Newars and Tibetans came for the occasion. It was quite a success. After that I gave instructions to Karmashila and Mahavirya on the methods of meditation.

I kept to my routine of religious practice. One day I discovered a crack in the rocks within the cave. I crept down through the crack and found myself in a small but comfortable cell. There was yet another hole and I peered through it with the help of a lamp, but I saw nothing. I was about to make a seat for myself in the cell to spend some time there when a number of scorpions came out of the hole. The scorpions went away when I lighted some incense sticks. I still imagined that something else might emerge from the hole and I was unable to concentrate my mind on my task.

It then occurred to me that I must think of a protecting deity. Accordingly I conjured up the image of Meghasamvara and prayed, "Please protect me from all harm." It was all the tricks of my own imagination- my fear as well as my protection from it, but then my mind became calm. I kept repeating the sacred words, "*Namo Buddhaya, Namu Dharmaya, Namu Sanghaya, Namu Ratnatrayaya* (Homage to the Buddha, to the Dharma, to the Brotherhood, to these Three Jewels)" After some time the words ceased of themselves and my concentration deepened.

After a while, I slowly opened my eyes and to my surprise I thought a man was looking closely at me. I shut my eyes at once but I continued to see the man's face. Once more my concentration was shattered. Then the man disappeared and I found



instead a basket full of refreshments and a picture of my teacher, Tshering Norbu, and some other monks. Whenever I sat down to meditate on the following ten days or so, the man's face haunted me.

One day, when I opened my eyes after a period of meditation, I saw a lama with matted hair. "Who are you?" I asked him, "Are you Maikanta the hermit?"

"Yes," he replied.

I got up instantly and invited him to take my seat. He sat down and asked, "How did you know I am Maikanta?"

"It just occurred to me."

"Do you wish to say something to me?"

"I have no special wish. However, as you have come yourself to such a difficult place, all I wish at the moment is that you would perhaps teach me something about *yoga*."

"Have you gone through the *wang* initiation?"

"Not yet. I am doing the *yoga* of the guru."

"First, you have to get the *wang*."

With these words, the hermit left.

Some days later I came out of the cave and the hermit learning of it, sent for me. I arrived at his place while he was conducting some rituals. He asked

me to sit higher than him. I was embarrassed and told him I could not possibly do so.

“You are a gelong,” he said, “I belong to Nyngmapa.<sup>27</sup> So you are entitled to sit higher than me.”

Upon my return from the visit to the hermit, I went back to the cave again. In order to avoid having to go out, I kept myself within the cave without any clothing at all. Mahavirya then came along with my food and he was so shocked at my nakedness that he never came again. Karmashila then came with food for me.

One day while I sat in meditation with my eyes closed, I sensed that someone was peeping at me from behind an image of Padmasambhava. But the moment I opened my eyes, whoever it was disappeared. The feeling however persisted and finally I got up and looked behind the image. There was no one and it disturbed me so much that I could not continue with my meditation. Later, at night I discovered a hole at the entrance to the cave and before long a white ball appeared there. My hair stood on end and I didn't know what to do until I heard a cat's meow.



One morning a large number of vultures were gathered on the mountain peak. Karmashila came and told me, “Guru, Mahasattva *Raja* <sup>28</sup> will be brought today. Would you like to go and watch?”

Not understanding what he meant, I said, “What did you say?”

“Don’t you see the vultures?” he asked.

“A dead body is being taken up the mountain. Hence, the vultures ...”

The funeral arrived at about 10 o’clock and we followed it to the disposal ground at the top of the mountain. After certain rituals, the members of the family of the deceased went away. Three undertakers were left to dispose off the dead body, while the vultures waited impatiently in a circle. The men turned the dead body so that it faced downwards and tied a rope around the neck and secured it against a rock. While two men walked around the ground to try to keep the vultures at some distance with their poles, the third man placed his foot upon the back of the dead body and cut off the arms and limbs.

The vultures got impatient and tried to come close. Having cut the body into pieces, the three men sprang aside, and the vultures finished it in no time. Only the head and big bones were left. The men placed these in a hole and crushed them with a stone. They mixed some *tsampa* and let the birds swallow the grisly food. Each vulture picked up a piece and flew away. There remained only a few large bones on the ground.

Then a very fierce bird appeared and we watched while it circled in the sky and gradually came down. We felt a chill down our spine when it landed in a cloud of dust. Some vultures who had stayed behind flew away at once and the big bird ate all the bones left on the ground. It occurred to us that the bird would perhaps make a meal of us too if we

stayed there. So, we made a hasty retreat from the place.



It was a very desolate mountain. Karmashila and Mahavirya often went to look for thorny plants and roots to use as fuel. It was wonderful to see herds of deer with twisted horns in this lonesome place. Once we saw some Tibetans coming up the mountain in a long file. We counted 30 men and every one of them carried a knife in his hand. Karmashila and Mahavirya concealed themselves in the cave.

Before long a man came to my cave and demanded, "Who are you?"

"I am a gelong from Nepal," I replied.

"What are you doing here?"

"I am engaged in a religious exercise."

"Do you have to stay naked for that?"

"My clothes have become old and torn, so I have used the same to sit upon."

"What do you eat here?"

"People who drop in like you leave me what food they have?"

He gave me a piece of bread and some money before he left.

My friends then emerged from their hiding and asked, "Guru, who was that man?"

"He came to see if there is anything here."

"We are saved because we have nothing at all. Otherwise, we would have attained *nirvana* today."

"Why do you say so?"

"They are not good men, Guru. They are robbers. They would not hesitate to murder people and rob them of their belongings."

The next time we visited Shigatse, we were sitting in the shop of our benefactor when a noble-looking nun came there with her servants. She paid her respects to us and gave us alms.

"You must be a woman of high station," I said to her, "I am very surprised that you are honoring us this way. But, as a matter of fact, we are just beginners and ignorant ones. What did you take us for?"

"I know well enough who you are," she replied, "I have not honoured you because of your knowledge. My reason for holding you in high esteem is that no one had told you to become monks. You became monks on your own. You came as far as Kyirong to be initiated by the Kuseo Rimpoche of Tsecholing monastery of Lhasa. Your family members even petitioned the Maharajah of Nepal<sup>29</sup> to make you return to lay life. The Maharajah himself threatened you with expulsion from the country unless you rejoined your family. You dared to defy him, give up your family and leave the country. In

Tibet, parents had to cajole their children to become monks and how many of them escape from the monasteries when they become older! That is why I hold you in high esteem.”

With these words, she paid her respects to us once more and left the shop. The merchant himself exclaimed, “You are blessed indeed to be held in such high esteem by a great nun.”

On another occasion, it was a man who came to the shop and said to Bhikshu Bir Singh: “Sahu, you are asked to keep the monk with you here. He has to sing in the evening.” With that message, the man hurried away and I said in protest: “I am a monk. I cannot sing nor play music.”

“Your protest is of no use,” replied the merchant, “Everyone knows of your performance in the house of Bhaju Krishna Sahu in Lhasa. If you speak of the rules for the monks, they will bring out the Lhasa story and make it difficult for you.”

I said: “I am perturbed by what the man has just said, ‘The monk has to sing.’ They seem to have a very poor opinion of me as a monk.”

“You are right, Guru,” said the merchant, “But Motilal is a very great merchant in Shigatse. He is very influential and feared by everyone, for he has links with the Maharajah in Nepal.”

“Despite his importance here, I don’t have to fear him,” I replied, “He is nothing to me.”

“Please don’t say so,” pleaded Bhikshu Bir Singh, “We will be in trouble and find it impossible to stay here. Please be kind to us.”

“Very well, then,” I said, “I’ll do nothing that will bring trouble to you. You have been very good to me.”

The merchant Motilal, pot-bellied and arrogant, came at 4 o’clock, followed by all the Newars in town. A seat of honour had been set aside for him. He sat down without further ado and everyone paid their respect to him from a distance, as if he was indeed the king, but he ignored them. I sat with my two friends in a corner of the shop. Bhikshu Bir Singh placed a bottle of wine and a plate of meat before the important person, who then gave the command, “Well, Monk, begin your *bhajan*.”

“How can I sing without a single musical instrument?” I said, “Even a *gaine* needs a fiddle.”

“Fetch a harmonium then,” he gave another command.

One man went on a run and came back with a harmonium, which I rejected because it had a leak. Another harmonium was brought but that too was of no use. At last a good one was placed before me. Then I asked for the *tabla* and it took some time for Chandra Bahadur Shakya of Kohiti Baha to try his hands at the drums. I placed my fingers on the keyboard and asked, “What do you merchants like to hear? A *raga* or its interpretation?”

“Both,” said the great man.

I began with a *bhajan* in Hindi.<sup>30</sup> In effect, it was about the need to share one's food, a portion of which was to be consumed by oneself, another portion was to be given in charity and a third portion to be kept for another day. The explanation lasted the whole night.

On the following morning, Motilal Sahu invited us to his house and begged me to forgive him. He said: "Guru, I didn't know that you are such a great person. Please pardon me for I have behaved in a most shameful way. I occupied a high seat while you sat at a lower seat and I allowed myself to order you to sing as if you were a *gaine*. How can I absolve myself of this sin? Unless you pardon me, I won't have peace of mind and the sin would hound me forever. I am an ignorant fool. Be kind to me. I have committed a great mistake. As I listened to you, I began to realise my mistake. It became clear to me as if I was looking at a mirror. I have felt as if I was sitting not on a pedestal but in a fire pit. You are truly great. Please pardon me."

With these words, he took hold of my feet in a most humble manner.

Later in the day, he invited all the Newars to a dinner and in the presence of everyone, he made a confession of his mistake. He was so changed that he listened to a *diksha* of Bajrajogini and declared me his guru. His behaviour towards me made all the Newars of Shigatse hold me in high respect.



One day I met my guru Tshering Norbu. "Gelong," he said, "I must introduce you to my own



guru.” And with that he took me along to the monastery. I touched the guru’s feet and sat down. The guru said: “Gelong, I hear that you have done very well. It is very good. There has been no bhajan so far about Lord Buddha. I must thank you for introducing it. But you have made a mistake. You mentioned that the Teacher left home, leaving his child in the womb, and further that the child was in the womb for six years. Is that true?”

My own guru, Tshering Norbu, also asked, “Is it true that you have said that Siddhartha was born out of the armpit?”

“It is written like that in the Lalitavistara,” I replied.

“Who wrote the Lalitavistara?” asked the guru's guru.

“It is a Sanskrit book and translated into the Newari language by Nistananda Bajracharya,” I explained.

“Writers are often wrong,” he said, “We must not say so, whatsoever other people may write. Siddhartha was not in the womb for six years. He was in the womb for ten months only. Nor did he emerge from the armpit; he was born in the usual way.”

After this conversation, we took leave of the guru and returned to our place.

On one occasion I had to explain to my two friends that in accordance with the rules for monks, they must not touch gold and silver. However, my words made Karmashila somewhat uneasy. So, I said

to him: "I think the time has come for us to go separate ways. We must not stay together for long."

I made arrangements for his stay in the town, and Mahavirya and I left Shigatse for Kalimpong, India.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> A famous merchant of Kathmandu in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was popularly known as Dhamansahu.
- <sup>2</sup> Located on the north-western edge of Kathmandu valley, on the trade route to Kyirong in Tibet.
- <sup>3</sup> A Tibetan monk, who came on pilgrimage to Kathmandu in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He helped in reviving Buddhism in the Newar community.
- <sup>4</sup> It is a famous folksong in Newari language about a couple who went on a pilgrimage to the holy lake in the mountains north of Kathmandu valley probably in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The wife, being very beautiful, was forceably seized and taken away by the king. A belief persists among the Newars that a husband and wife should not undertake the pilgrimage to the lake together.
- <sup>5</sup> The full moon is a sacred day for Buddhists. The Buddha Shakyamuni was born, became enlightened and passed away on a full moon day.
- <sup>6</sup> It is customary to have a new name with some religious significance after taking the vows and robe of a Buddhist monk.
- <sup>7</sup> A government official who was influenced by the Tibetan monk Tshering Norbu and became a monk.
- <sup>8</sup> The road from Kalimpong in India to the border with Tibet was built after the Younghusband Expedition to Lhasa in 1904 and by 1908 Nepal had lost the use of its ancient trade route to Tibet.
- <sup>9</sup> See Syamukapu- A Recollection.

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- <sup>10</sup> Five Newars who had become Buddhist monks and refused to return to lay life were expelled from Nepal in circa 1924. The author was one of them.
- <sup>11</sup> See A Pilgrim in Tibet.
- <sup>12</sup> A king who became a saint belonging to the Gorakhnath sect in India.
- <sup>13</sup> One of the social organizations called pala in Newari, that took care of social and religious functions of the Newar community in the Tibetan capital. Besides Chusinsya, some other pala were Chyatanga, Jhwala, Ghorasya, Kun, Lhakan, Tarunshya and Bajrasattva.
- <sup>14</sup> Called Sako in Newari, the town is located about 12 miles to the north-east of Kathmandu city on the principal trade route to Tibet via Kutu.
- <sup>15</sup> It is the life story of the Buddha Shakyamuni, translated from the original Sanskrit into Newari language by the scholar Nistananda Bajracharya. It was the first book in Newari to be brought out in printed form in 1914.
- <sup>16</sup> See A Trade Fair in Tibet..
- <sup>17</sup> There is a belief that a Buddha would be born in the future. The full name is Arya Maitreya Bodhisattva, literally the noble Maitreya, the Buddha-to-be.
- <sup>18</sup> The embodiment of evil in Buddhist mythology. Mara made efforts to lead Siddhartha away and prevent him from becoming the Buddha.
- <sup>19</sup> The Buddhist God of Compassion, who is known by many different names under different conditions
- <sup>20</sup> The society of Buddhist monks called sangha.
- <sup>21</sup> Apparently a ruler of ancient Tibet at the time of the introduction of Buddhism, probably in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.
- <sup>22</sup> The great Buddhist teacher, known in Tibet as Guru Rimpoche, towards the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.
- <sup>23</sup> The legendary merchant prince Simhasarathabahu or Chakandyo, who led the first ever caravan to Tibet to trade, and his 500 banja or assistants were rescued from the hands of wicked witches disguised as beautiful women, by Karunamaya, who came in the form of a horse. Hence the boats in Tibet carried a symbolic horse head on its prow. This is the subject of

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a popular series of re-birth stories in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism.

24 The famous poet saint of Tibet who spent much of his time in the caves in the mountains in Tibet and Nepal in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

25 A diety of the Bajrayana tradition in the Buddhist pantheon.

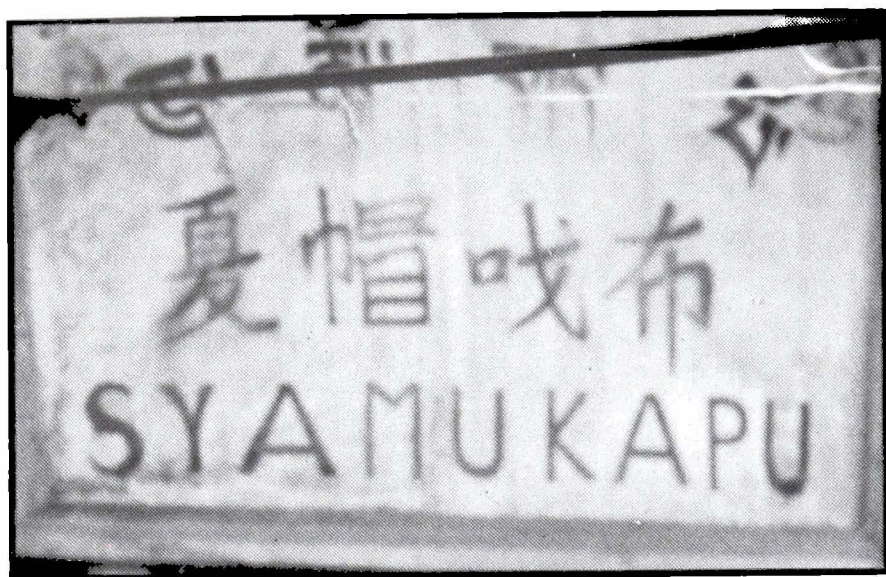
26 A very powerful goddess of the Bajrayana tradition.

27 The Red Hat sect of Buddhism in Tibet.

28 The legendary raja or prince who took pity upon hungry tiger cubs and cut off flesh from his own body to feed them. The place where this is said to have taken place, Namo Buddha, in the hills in the district of Kabhre Palanchok, some 24 miles to the east of Kathmandu valley, is a place of pilgrimage for Newars and Tibetans alike.

29 Chandra Shumshere Jung Bahadur Rana, Prime Minister of Nepal from 1901 to 1929, discouraged the revival of Buddhism among the Newars in Nepal.

30 In the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century religious songs in Hindi, the language of India, was popular in Nepal.



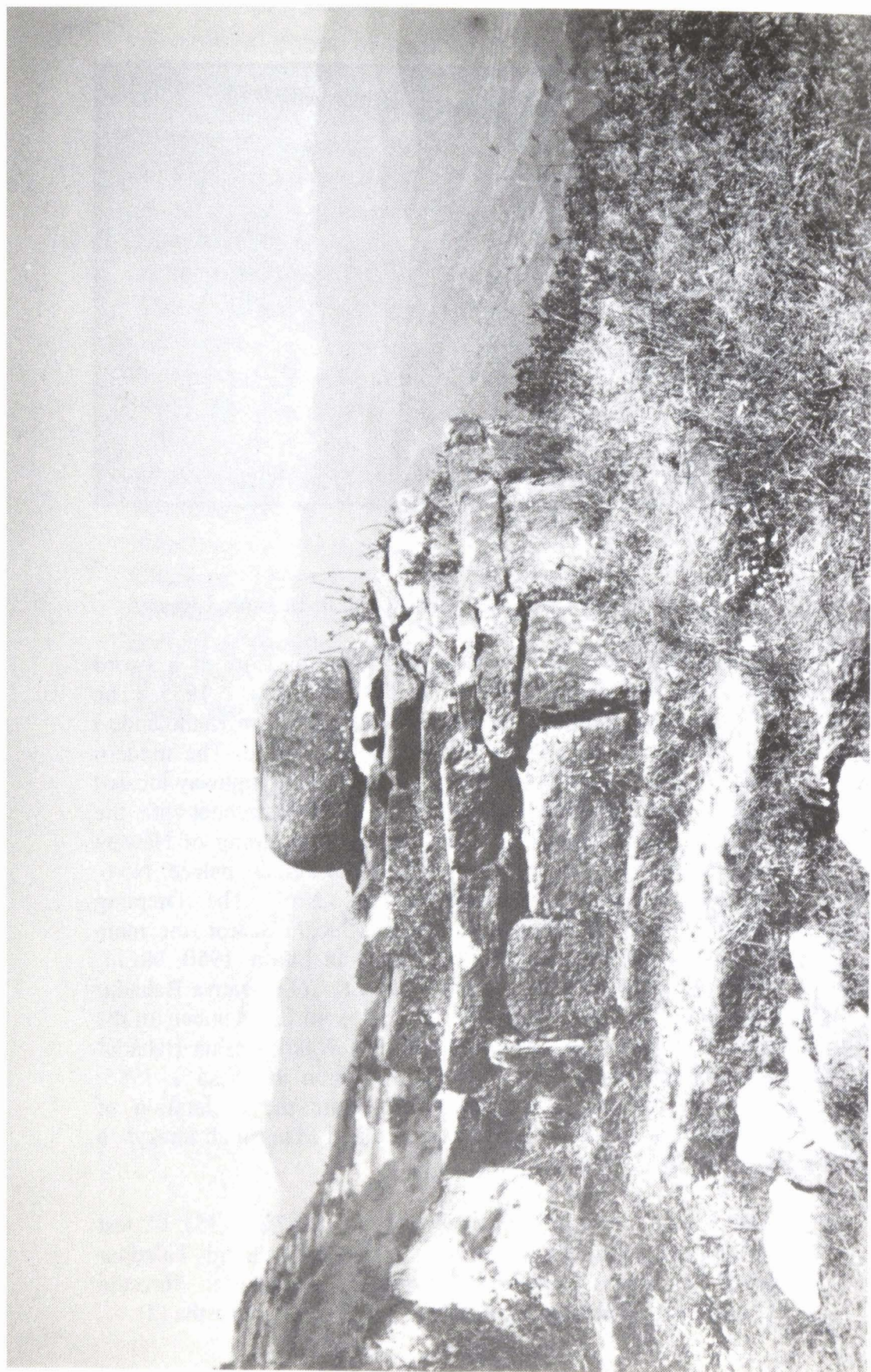
### **The famous Syamukapu signboard in Barkor, Lhasa**

Cover – Men in women's dress and Western attire at a sword procession in Mohani or Dasain festival in Lhasa, c 1955. (The masquerade is peculiar to Lhasa; it is not known in Kathmandu.)

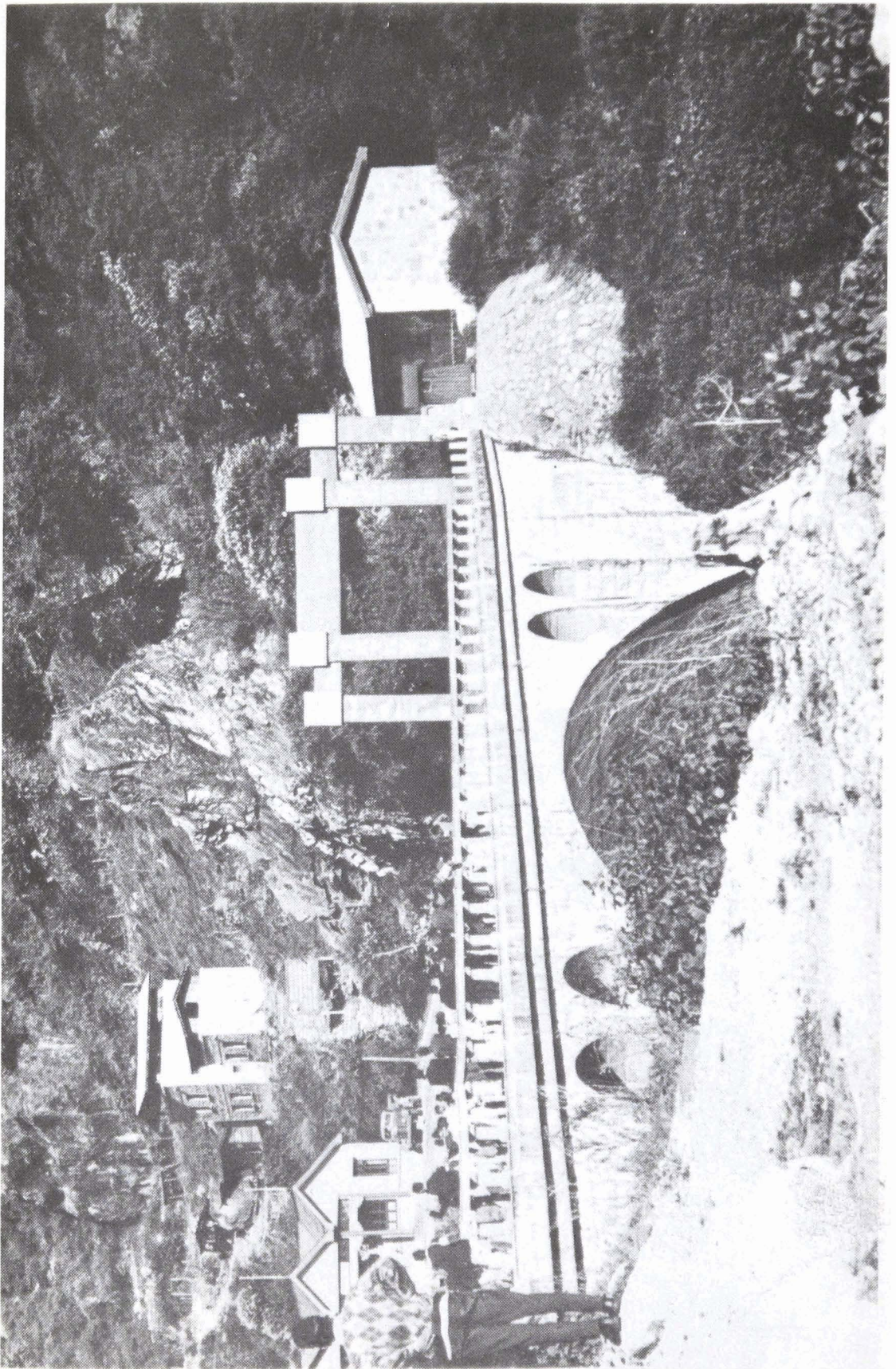
No.1. The Stupa at Lagaco beyond Sankhu; No.2. The modern Maitri Sangu or Friendship Bridge on the Arniko highway located on the border across the Kodari river; No.3. The ferryboat with the head of a wooden horse at the prow; No.4. A group of Newars arrive on the outskirts of Lhasa; No.5. The Potala palace; No.6. The Norbulingkha or summer palace; No.7. The Drepung monastery; No.8. The Ganden monastery; No.9. Barkor, the main street of Lhasa, 1980; No.10. A festival in Lhasa, 1950; No.11. The Wakil or Representative of Nepal, Lt. Col. Hiranya Bahadur Bista, with some of the merchants, c. 1946; No.12. Members of the Nepalese Chamber of Commerce with the Wakil, Keshar Bahadur K.C, c 1948; No.13. The sword procession in Lhasa, c 1955; No.14. A gathering in Lhasa to celebrate the declaration of democracy in Nepal in 1951; No.15. Buddhi Man Singh Shakya, a merchant in his shop in Lhasa.

Photo Credits: Buddhi Man Singh Shakya (5,6,7,8,10,15); C. Jest (Syamukapu signboard above 1,3,9); Harsha Bir Singh Tuladhar (cover 13); Purna Kaji Tamrakar (4,12); Dirgha Man Shrestha (11); Nhuchhe Bahadur Bajracharya (14); and S.L. Shrestha (2).

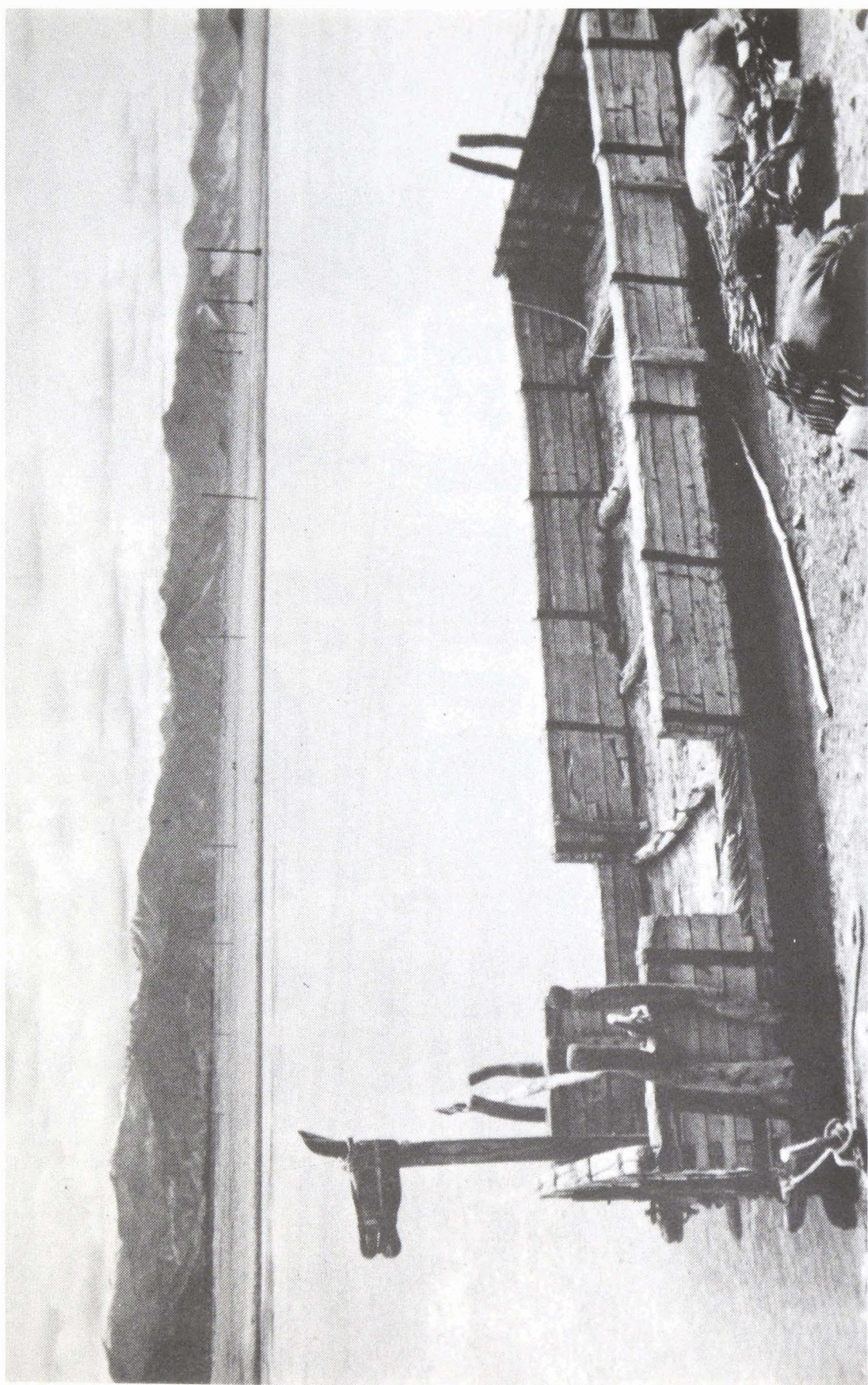




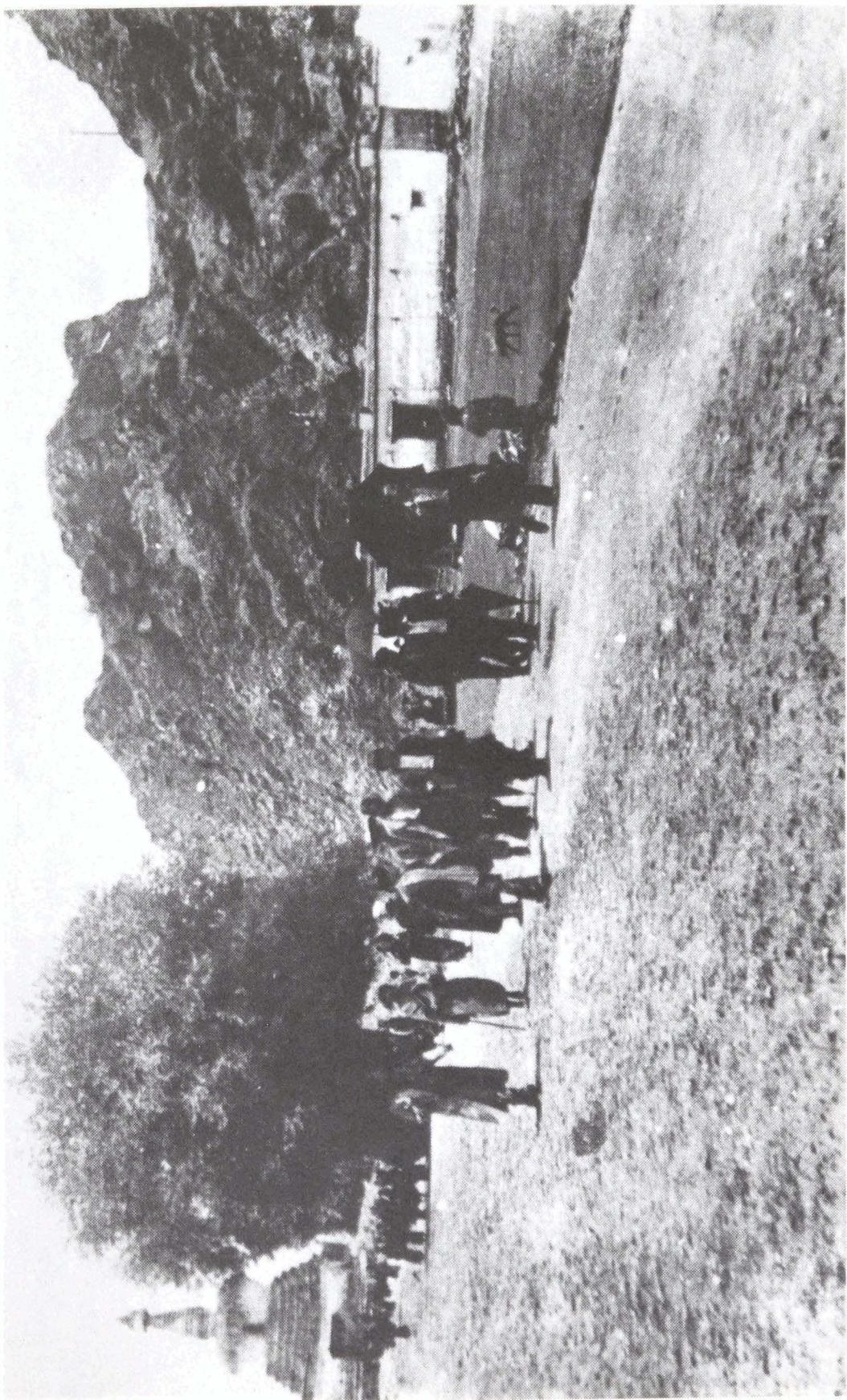




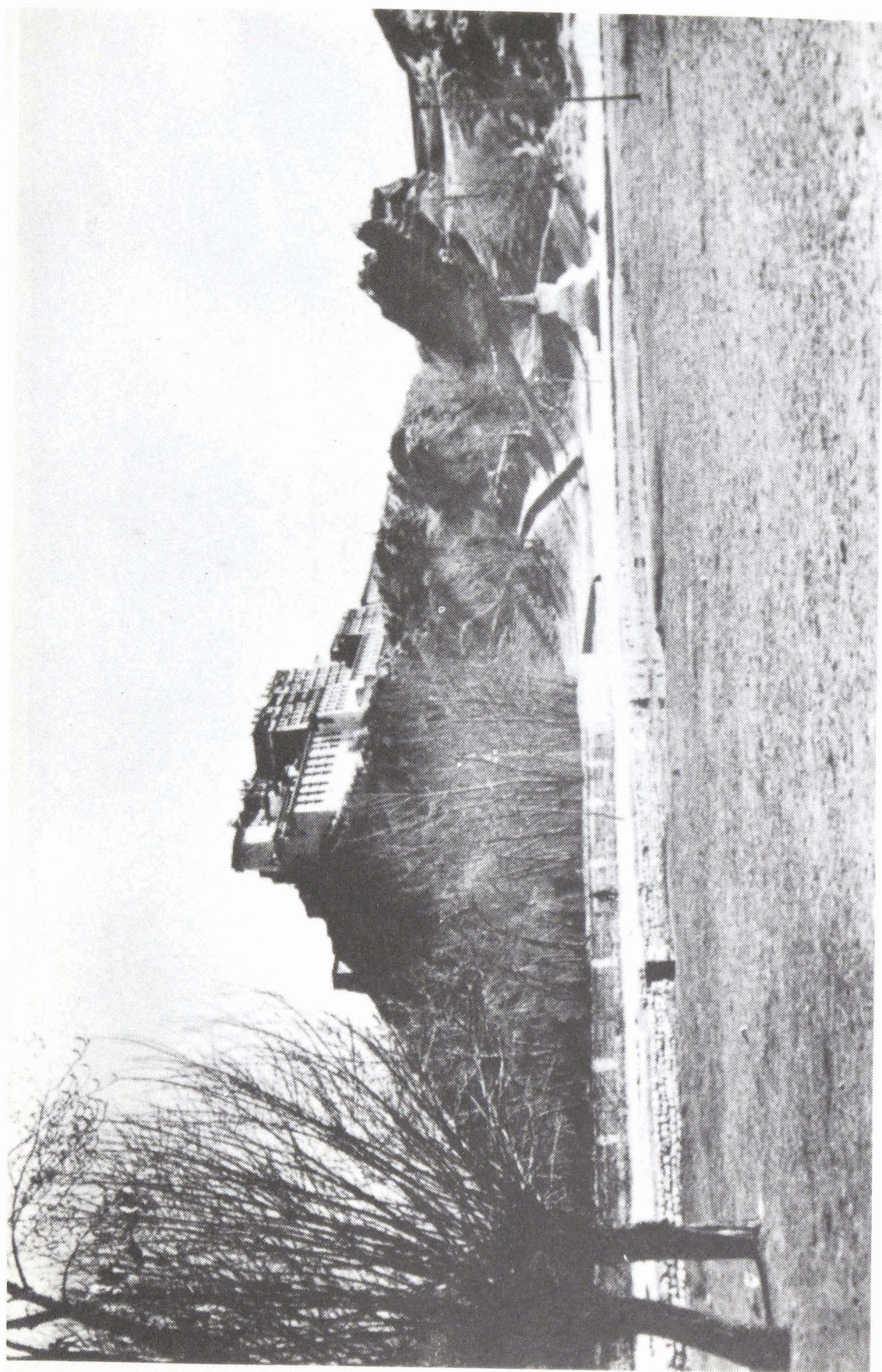




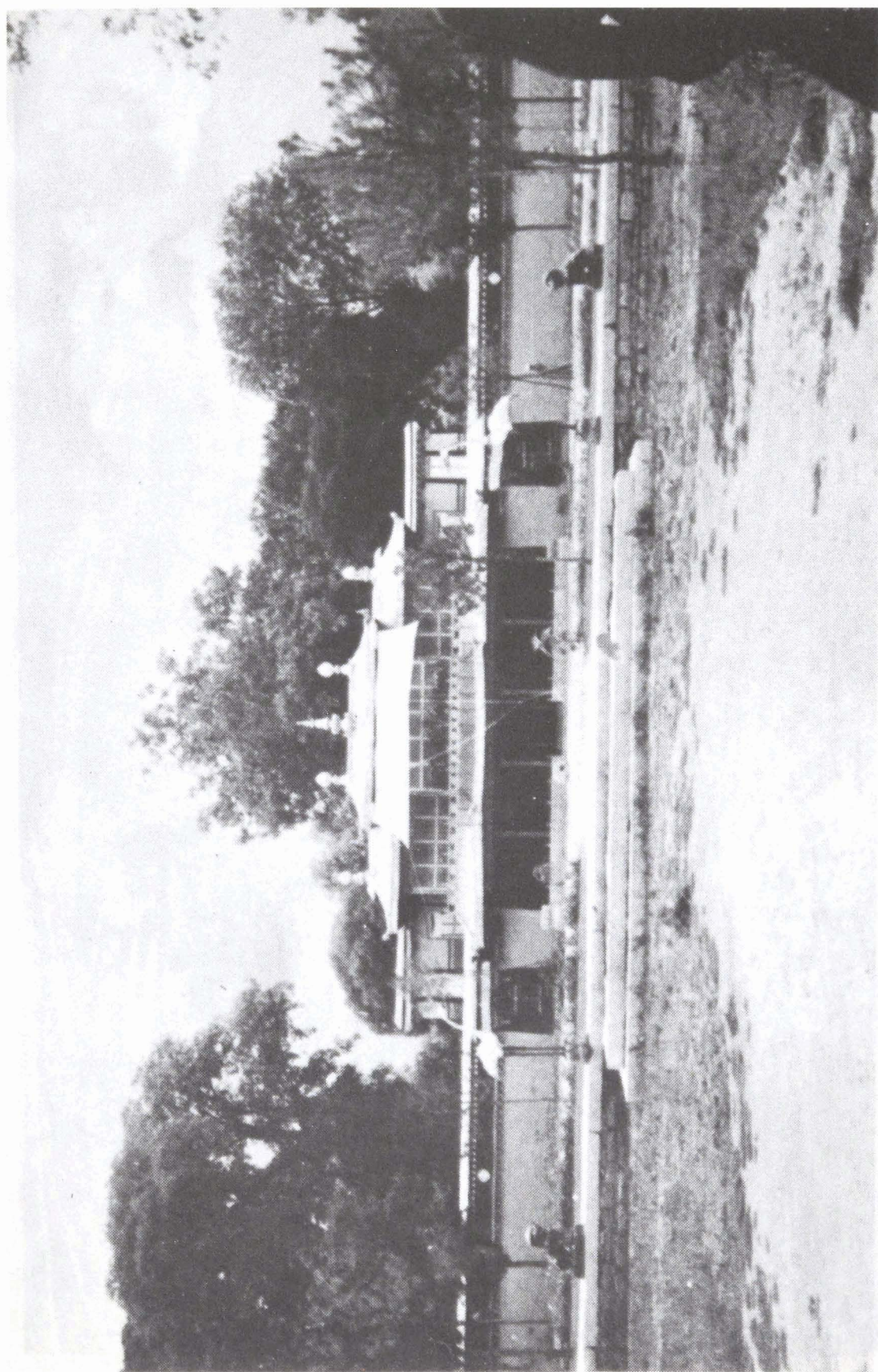




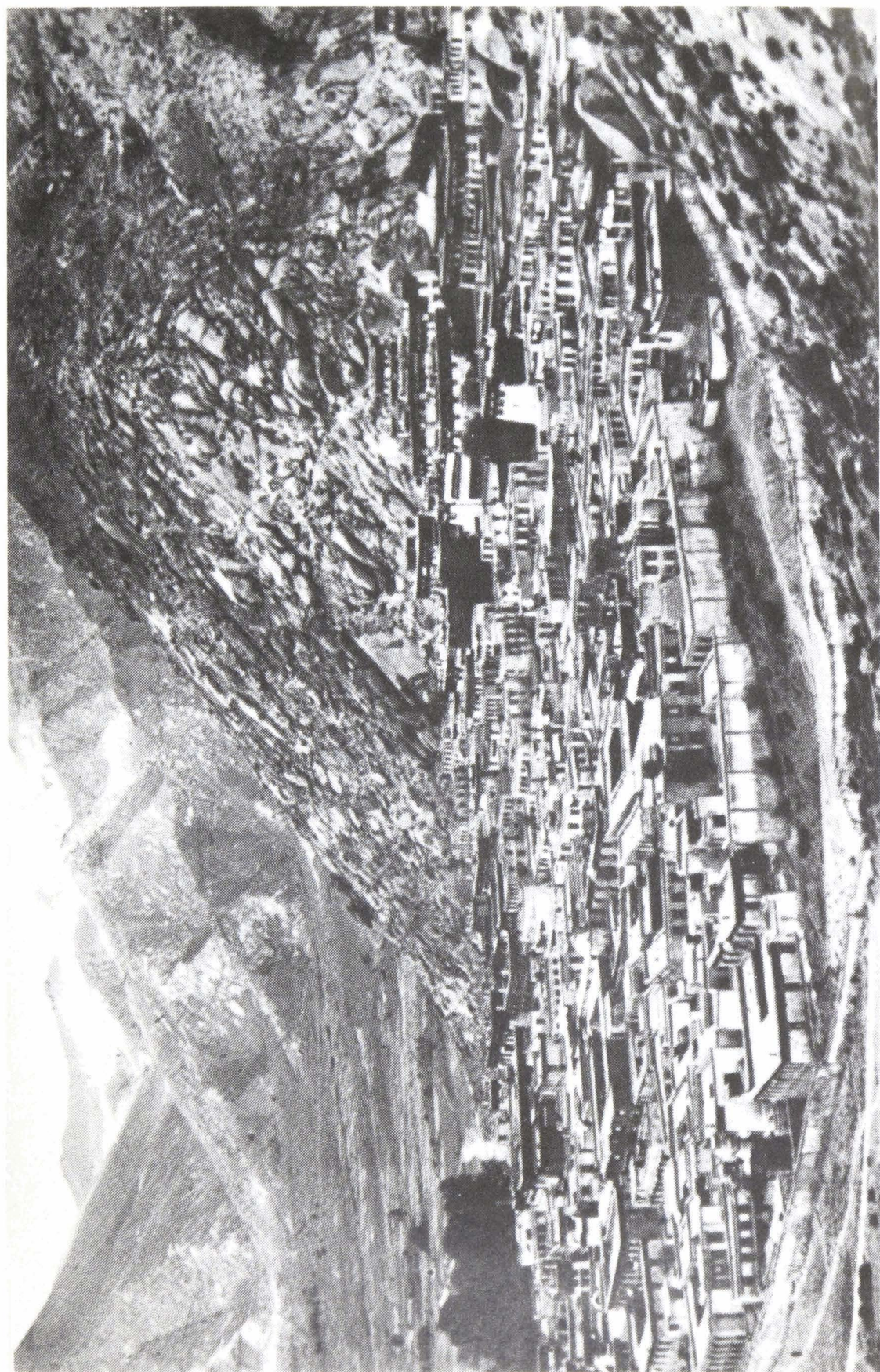




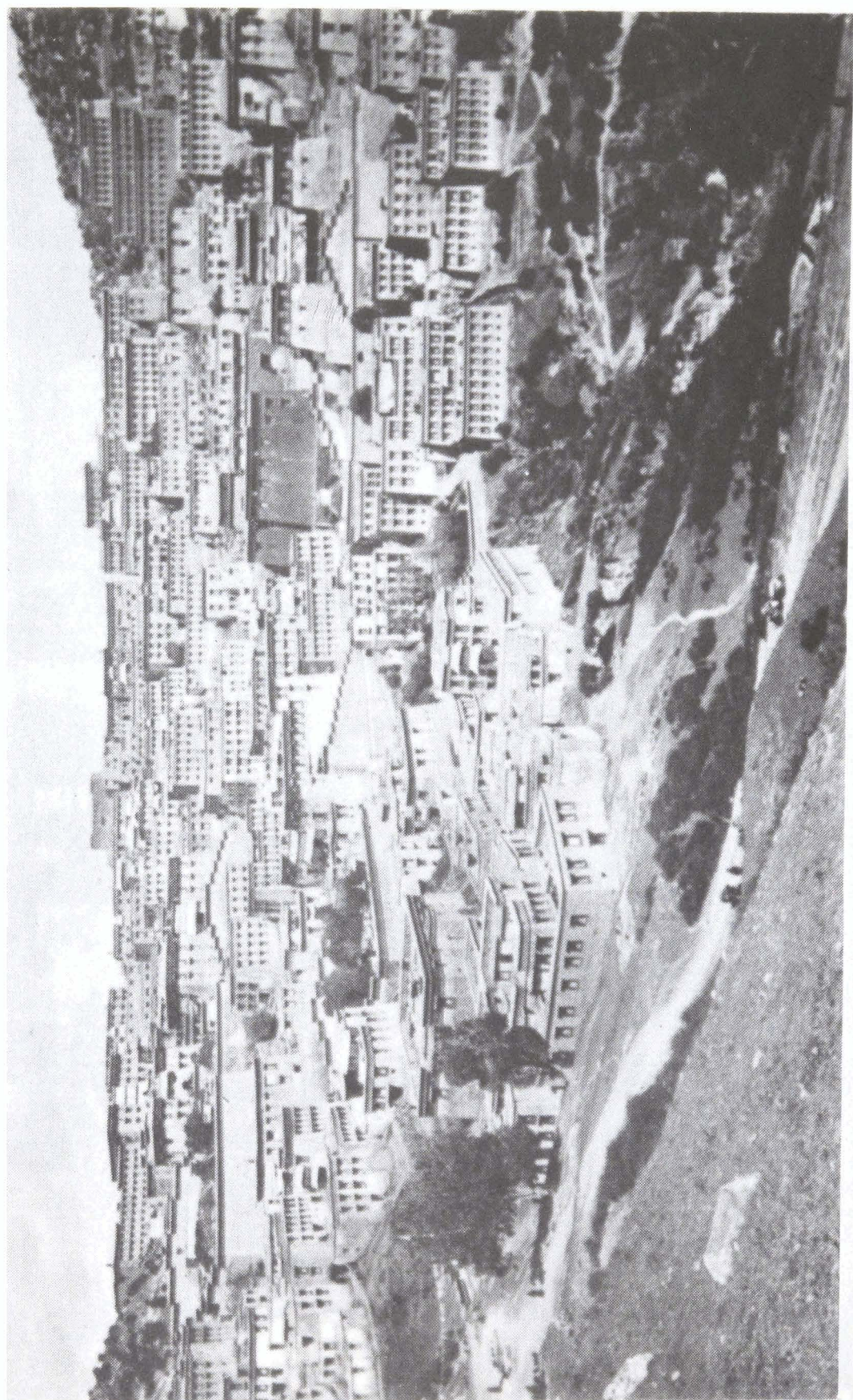




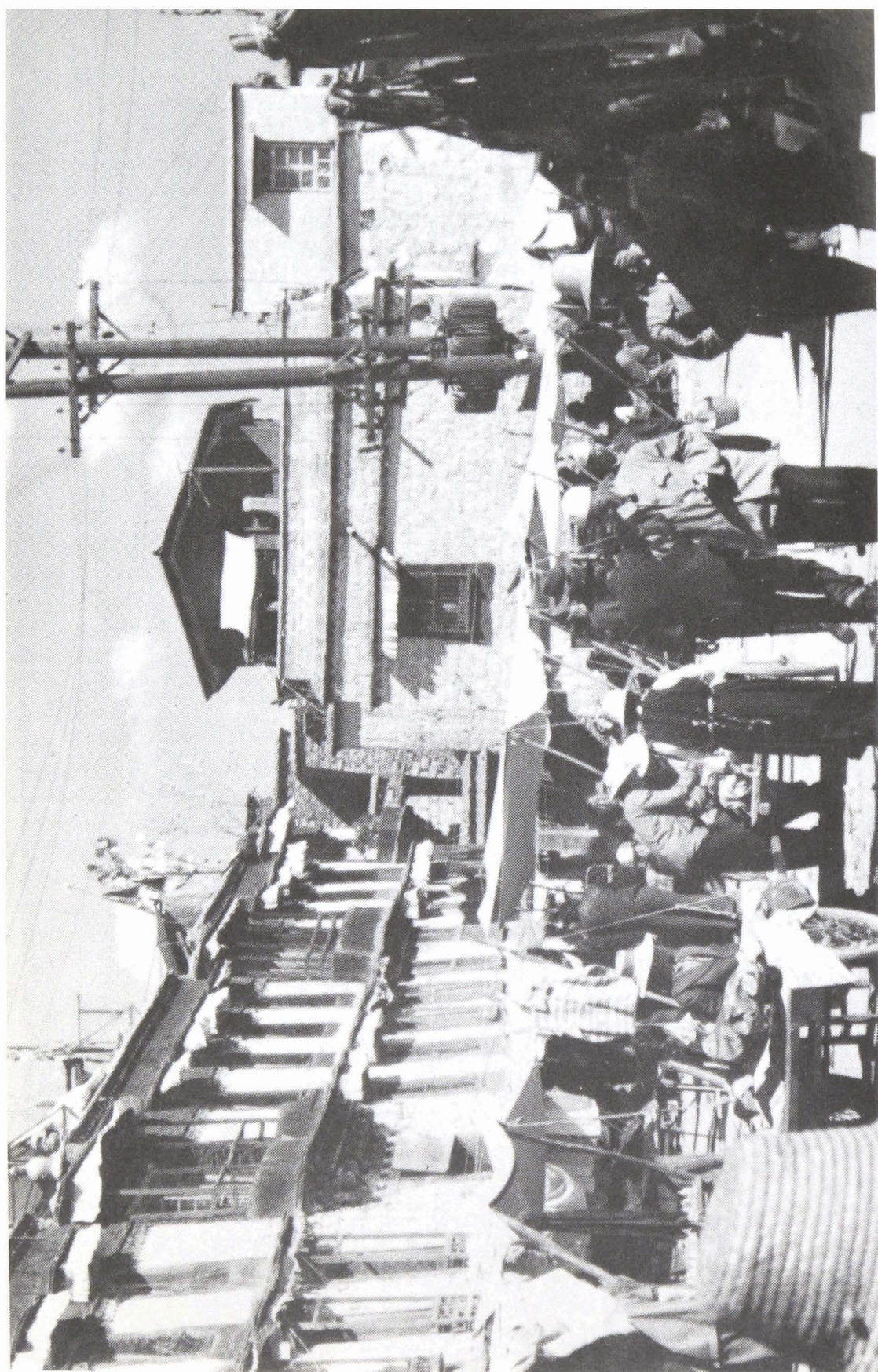






















श्री ३ मखराज बी जय !  
नेपाली वाणिज्य सङ्घ, सप्तरी।  
(NEPALESE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, LHASA)



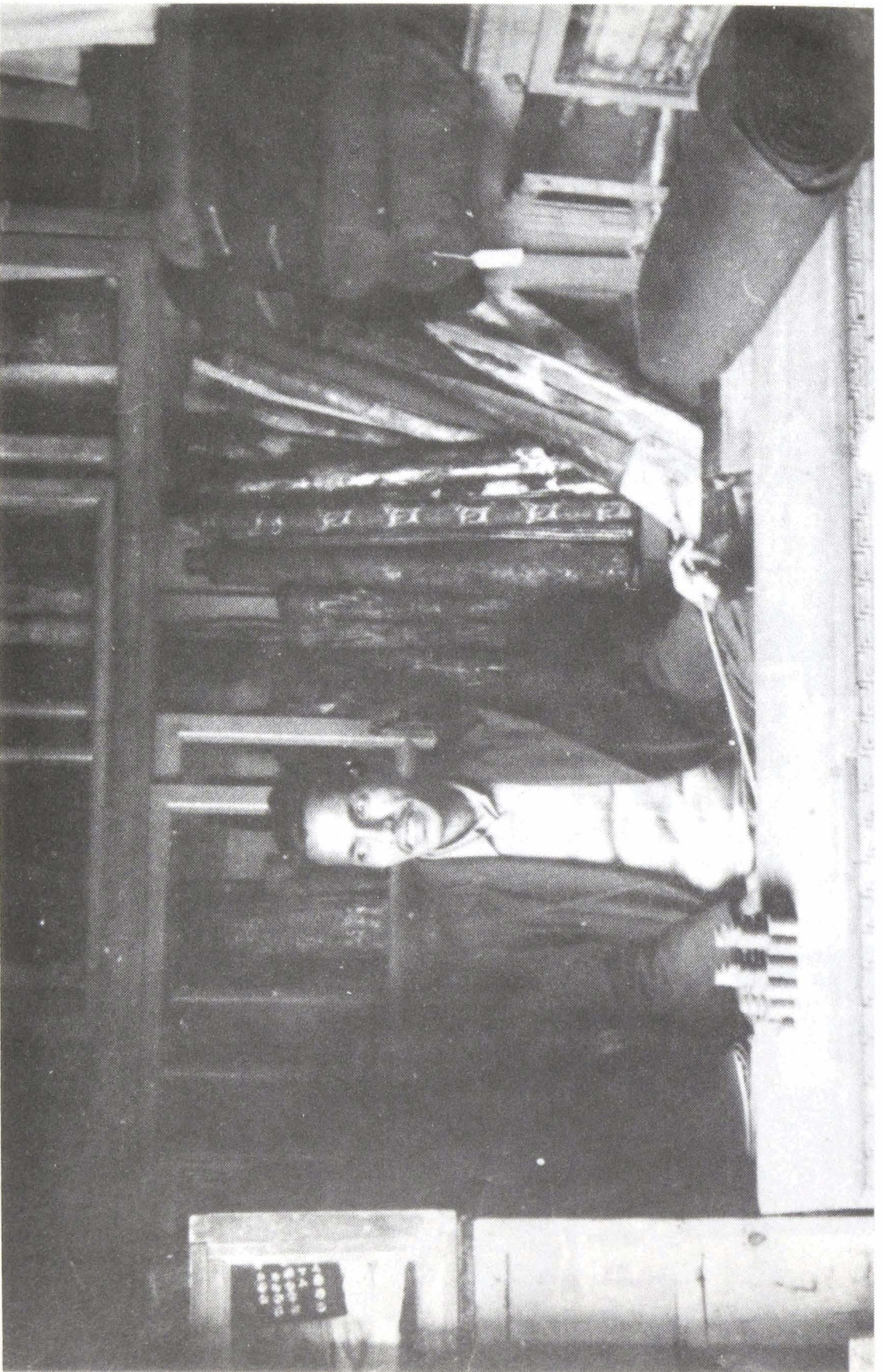












# A PILGRIM IN TIBET

Dharmaloka Mahasthavir

*Dharmaloka Mahasthavir (Dasratna Tuladhar/ Baransahu, 1890-1967) was a trader in Lhasa, who became a Buddhist monk in 1933. In 1929, he had come in contact with the famous Indian scholar, Rahul Sankrityayana, in Kathmandu, and in 1934, both of them travelled together to Lhasa. In 1935, he undertook a pilgrimage alone to Mt. Wutai in China, the home of Bodhisattva Manjusri, the legendary founder of Nepal valley.*

*This account of his travels in Tibet in 1934 is based on his book in Newari language, Mahachin Yatra (A Journey to China), published in 1950.*

MANY years ago I came across some Tibetans in Lhasa who claimed to have seen the Bodhisattva Manjusri<sup>1</sup> in a temple in the mountain in China known among us Newars as Pancasirsha. The Chinese called it Wu Tai Shan<sup>2</sup> and the Tibetans Ripuchenga. It was quite unbelievable but I said to myself, "If they can go to Pancasirsha, why can't I?" And so I made up my mind to go on a pilgrimage to China and see Manjusri with my own eyes.

However, it took a long time for my dream to come true, for my business kept me busy in one place or another. On a visit to Calcutta, I took my eight-year old son, Gajaratna, along with me. I left him with his maternal uncle, a merchant named Mahadhar, at his *kothi* at Madhav Bhavan in Harrison Road. Then, in the company of Mahadhar's son and

another person- Tuyukaji of Yetkha Baha, Kathmandu- I made my way to Assam

There was a trading post in the jungles on the border between Assam and Bhutan. Assamese, Bhutanese, Nagas, Marwaris and other Indian traders came and built bamboo shelters for themselves and carried on their trade for a couple of months every year. The Bhutanese sold sealing wax worth hundreds of thousand rupees while the Nagas sold silk cocoons and a raw silk cloth known as *bhulaya*. I bought a thousand rupees worth of the silk material in the fair. There were many tea gardens in Assam and tea was also one of the main items of trade.

Prior to my visit to the fair in the Assam jungles, I did not know that *bhulaya* actually came from the land of the Nagas and taken by traders to Calcutta and Lhasa. Travelling can be quite instructive. Before the construction of the road from Kalimpong to the Tibetan border, all the goods that the Tibetans needed were sent from Nepal. They believed that all these goods were made in Nepal, and the Newars were *norbu*, the “jewel” among men because of their talent and skill. With the opening of the road directly from India, the Tibetans themselves came to Calcutta and began to engage in trade. Consequently, they lost their respect for the Nepalese. As long as they had the monopoly in trade, the Nepalese merchants were very prosperous, but with the change in the Tibetan attitude towards them, many business houses went out of business.



In 1933, I took the robes at Kusinagar<sup>3</sup> in India, and in the following year went to Kalimpong



in order to travel once more to Lhasa, not as a merchant, but as a Buddhist monk on a pilgrimage. Two weeks after my arrival in the town, Rahul Sankrityayana<sup>4</sup> also came and suggested that I accompany him on the journey to Lhasa. He was taking with him an Indian by the name of Rajnath Pande to assist him in taking photographs of Buddhist texts in the monastery of Sakya. We stayed for about a month in Sahu Bhajuratna's *kothi* while the preparation for the journey was being made. We left Kalimpong for Lhasa on April 22, 1934.

In Lhasa we stayed in the *kothi* of Dharmaman Sahu, who belonged to Chusinsyapala. A week later, I went to live at Phorankha, located about four miles from the city. From time to time I visited the city. There was a place in the neighbourhood of Phorankha where dead bodies were fed to the vultures.

Then, with a 14-year old boy as companion and guide, I began a tour of many places where I had not gone all the years that I had been engaged in business in Lhasa. My first destination was Dhayerwa, where I spent five days. The strangest sight there was a large, black rock, in which the words *Om Mane Padme Hum*<sup>5</sup> appeared in milky white characters. There was also a cemetery in the area.

My next object was Ganden. The monastery lay two days' away and the monks welcomed me heartily and provided me with a room and food during my week-long stay. They dubbed me *gyakar* gelong, an Indian monk, and took me to all the important places and pointed out various objects from Nepal and India. One day the body of an important

official, who had died in Lhasa, was brought to Ganden with great pomp and ceremony and all the monks went down the mountain and met the funeral procession. About three thousand monks must have gathered there on the occasion, and each of them was given a present of two *mohar* in cash. I was also the recipient of the gift. While the monks recited a holy text and an elaborate religious service went on, sandalwood and camphor and sweet-smelling herbs were thrown into the flames that consumed the body of the great man.

Soon I was on the road again. I met some people who were going to a festival at the monastery of Samye. I was tempted to follow them but it was quite late in the afternoon when, beyond a river, I saw some houses in the woods. The water was deep and it was with some difficulty that we were able to ford it. We called aloud in the dark but only the dogs barked back and we feared them. After a long time, a man called back, "Who's that?" We shouted to him. "Please tie up the dogs." And then we heard him say, "They are tied up. Come on, they won't hurt you." Yet we advanced with some trepidation and when we approached the house, a man emerged and held the dogs. We found some other travellers too on their way to Samye. The next morning all of us went together.

By early afternoon, we were atop a mountain, where not a blade of grass nor a stone was to be seen. It was all covered with snow and the sun was bright. I didn't have goggles, and it was becoming difficult for me to look anywhere. At the pass, a lama, who was also an oracle, was having his lunch. He had seven followers and horses and yaks. The lama asked where I was going. "To Samye," I



replied. "That's good," said the lama, "We are also going in the same direction. Come along with us." The lama then asked whether I had my meal. When I said "No," the lama's men gave some of their food to my companion and me. They also offered me a drink of *chang*, which I declined. After the meal, I went down the mountain along with the lama and his men. In the meanwhile, my eyes began to give me trouble. As evening approached, we parted company. The lama went towards his monastery at Imalung and I to Samye, which was still beyond half a day's walk.

We spent the night in a village. My suffering was great and I thought I was going to lose my sight. Our hosts were helpful but to no avail. One of them told me about his own experience. "Don't be frightened," he said, "The blindness caused by snow is usually cured a day later, by the time you are afflicted with. There is no treatment for it, but you might wash your eyes with *chang*."

Accordingly, I sent for some *chang* and followed his instructions. The eyes became somewhat cool but the terrible pain persisted during the night. The next morning when I looked at a mirror, both eyes were red and the pupils dilated. I kept it up with great fortitude. As the day wore on, I seemed to get some relief but the eyes remained red.

Except for an occasional irritation, there was no pain the next day. As the lama of Imalung had urged me to come to his place, instead of going to Samye, I retraced my steps and made for his monastery. The bright sunshine still gave me some problem. Seeing my plight, a man at Imalung gave me a pair of goggles which gave me much relief.

On the following day the lama put on a suit made of silk and brocade. His boots had eyes embroidered on them. He put on a silk cap decorated with bird plumes, and from his neck hung a golden amulet. He ascended a high chair, took a handful of rice and recited secret words until he became possessed. His complexion changed. He came down the chair and began to move and jump about. No one was able to hold him and the people began to pray. I was feeling uneasy at the sight. The first deity that took possession of the lama uttered a shrill cry like that of a bird and the next moment he barked like a dog. For about an hour, he spoke of events that would come in the course of the year. The possession came to an end then and the lama was overcome with sleep. When the lama woke up an hour later, he was quite normal. The next day I left for Samye.

A great wall surmounted by a number of stupa encircled the monastery at Samye. There was also a wall on which was hung a huge *thanka*, about 30 cubits long, with silk embroidery that depicted Padmasambhava. Among many images there was a large one of Shakyamuni in the main monastery. Samye had three oracles who made prophecies about future events and the government in Lhasa sent a special *kudrug* or officer with the ceremonial *khata* to them.

My arrival at Samye coincided with a week-long festival, during which the oracles made prophecies. One day, one of the possessed lamas hit the people assembled there with a sword about one and half cubits long. One man was hit so hard that he began to bleed and everyone was pleased, because it was an act of god.

After a week at Samye, I went a whole day towards the east and arrived at a retreat where a lama from Kham lived. He had long hairs and a shell hung from his ears. As he was a well-known astrologer, I asked him if I would succeed on my pilgrimage to China. He threw the chips used in the Tibetan dice game called *sho* on the floor and pondered ever the configuration for a considerable moment before he declared, "You will go within a year." I was very pleased to hear it.

Returning to Samye, I stayed two more days before resuming my pilgrimage. Three days later and having crossed a river in a *syame* as the boat with a wooden horse head at the prow is called, I arrived at Chitisho. Quite a number of Newar offsprings by their Tibetan wives lived in the village and I joined them in a six-mile long circumambulation<sup>6</sup> of their sacred mountain. They carried food with them and made the pilgrimage a picnic too. After a few days, I went to Champaling with its big stupa-like monastery, where a large number of Newar merchants had gathered. My own brother had come from Lhasa for the annual fair, which began with the offering of a *pata* or a long, narrow strip of cloth from the top of the big monastery. A feast was held by the merchants at the conclusion of the week-long fair.

Two days later I was on my way again, first to a monastery and then to the caves of Dhanyaju. I climbed a ladder with as many as 30 rungs to attain a height, from where I had to take hold of a rope to get to a cave, from where another ladder led me to yet another dark but spacious cave. I found an image of Padmasambhava in yet another cave. Coming out of the caves, I took my meal together with my young

Tibetan friend. Then, we visited Jhokhambu, where a small stream issued from a huge crack in the mountain. It was dark as we made our way along the course of the water to come to a pond, where we found images of different gods. We kept walking for about two hours when we came to a spring. It was said that all kinds of food tasted like curd at the spring. At last, we came out of the crack in the mountain and spent the night in a nearby village.

I had originally planned to be away from Lhasa for a few days only but five weeks had gone by the time we returned to the city. The parents of my young guide had thought the worst and they had lost all hope of our returning. They had visited the soothsayers and despite assurances to the contrary, they concluded that we had come to a sorry end at the hand of the robbers. When my young companion described all the places we had visited, his parents were very impressed and they believed that we were very fortunate and that we possessed great fortitude.

I spent the next month listening to religious lectures given by the abbot of Sera. The spacious hall in the monastery of Murun accomodated thousands of people. A long, narrow platform, about three cubits higher than the floor, was built in the center of the hall, and the audience sat on either side. They brought their own mats to sit upon. It was possible to get the front seats only by humouring a certain priest.

The discourse began with an exhortation to the audience to listen with the utmost attention. It occurred to me that religion was rooted deeply in Tibet because the learned lamas made great efforts to explain the texts clearly and the people followed the teachings with great sincerity. The teachers were not

only proud of their faith but also very strict in the observance of their religious code. Service to humanity was the motto that guided both the lamas and the laity. One had to visit Tibet, Burma and Sri Lanka in order to fully appreciate the precept and practice of religion.

Once a nun, who was believed to be knowledgeable in religious matters, but who had lost her sense, questioned the validity of the discourse being given by the abbot of Sera. The audience forced her out of the hall but she continued to rant outside the monastery gate. Towards the end of the discourse, each and every member of the audience presented the lama with gifts, such as umbrellas, rosaries, flowers, etc. Being a monk, the lama had no use for all the gifts and he took only some of them and distributed the rest among the different monasteries in Lhasa. On the last day, the people brought wheat, flour, *ghee*, sweets, fruits, etc. for a religious service. It was a good custom and all the people took part whole-heartedly in the belief that it was a very meritorious undertaking. At the end of the month-long discourse in the monastery of Murun I returned once more to Phorankha.

About a month later, during one of my visits to Lhasa city, I found Rahulji ready to return to India. "My work is done," he told me, "I am going back to Nepal and then to India." "But I am not ready to go yet," I informed him, "I must go on a pilgrimage to Pancasirsha mountain in China to pay my homage to Manjusri."

He was surprised at my words. "How will you go?" he asked, "Where will you get the money for the journey? With whom will you go?"

**“I have my begging bowl,” I said, “I’ll just walk and go along with whosoever I come across.”**

**“But will you meet Manjusri there?” he asked again.**

**I told him what I had heard from various people and expressed my belief that I would meet Manjusri, who had visited Nepal, in flesh and blood.**

**“So, you are not returning home,” he said at last, “Well and good if you meet Manjusri.”**

**“I am determined to go to China,” I said, “I will return if I can. Otherwise, let me see what will happen.”**

**Some days later, I learnt from Mahila, son of Ratna Das Sahu, what Rahulji had told him about me: “It would be well and good if he makes the pilgrimage. There are three things in life that are blameless. The first is to be very learned and learn to keep the mind under control. The second is to travel extensively to know both happiness and sorrow so as to be able to keep the mind under restraint, and the third option is to remain quietly in one place and devote oneself to meditation and contemplation in order to keep the mind under control. These are all equally great and worthy pursuits in life.”**

**I was more than ever encouraged to undertake my pilgrimage to China. Rahulji left for Nepal soon and I returned to Lhasa and devoted myself to find ways and means to reach Pancasirsha mountain in China.**

I called on some of the merchants of Kham – Pandatsang, Gyapuntsang and Tsenitsang- in their homes. They used to travel often as far away as Tachindo. “Do me a favour,” I implored them,” I wish to go on a pilgrimage to pay my homage to Manjusri at Ripuchenga in China. I have heard that there is a railway line from Tachindo. Kindly send me with your men to Tachindo.” The merchants were sympathetic and assured me of their help, but when it was time for their men to undertake the journey, none of them dared to take me along. They said to their masters: “The monk does not ride horseback; he wants to go on foot. He does not eat in the evening. How can he go?” And they said to me: “The journey takes four to five months in very difficult terrain. You cannot make it.” I came to the conclusion that if they were unwilling, I could not possibly go with them.

When I lost all hope of joining a caravan to Tachindo, I paid a visit to the lama of Phorankha, who, I learnt, had been invited to give religious lectures by the people of Kham. I thought that I could at least travel with him as far as Kham. “I wish to go on a pilgrimage to Ripuchenga,” I told the lama, “Please permit me to accompany you to Kham.” The lama agreed to take me with him. However, I learnt later that he would go only up to Kongo. It didn’t help me much to go only that far.

It was then that Maharatna Shakya’s son by his Tibetan wife, Tshering Tashi, learnt about my proposed pilgrimage, perhaps, from his guru, Dorje Choya, who hailed from China. Tashi sent for me and said: “There is a lama who can take you to China. When I mentioned your intention to go on a pilgrimage, the lama asked me to bring you to him.”

He got a woman to take me at once to Drepung, where the lama was staying.

“I have heard a great deal in Nepal that Manjusri lived in China,” I said to the lama, “Years ago, when I was a trader in Lhasa, I had met men who had been to the mountain where he lived. I had then made up my mind that I too would make a pilgrimage and pay my homage to Manjusri. Now I am a monk and it is the proper time to go on the pilgrimage. I have talked to the Khambas who go to Tachindo to buy tea, but none would take me along with them.”

I don't know what he thought of my idea, but he was sympathetic and said with apparent sincerity: “You cannot go alone. I am going to China next year. I have work here at Drepung in connection with the installation of 1,000 Buddha images. When my task is done, I'll take you to China or wherever else you wish to go. Don't worry.” There was not much time to discuss the matter further that day, but he told me to see him often.

Within a week I was back at Drepung, and the lama said: “China is not India. It is a very crowded country. Wait a year and I'll take you there myself.”

“You have so much work,” I replied, “Perhaps, next year too you may have much more to do. And you have become old too. Anything can happen in a year. I would like to go soon.”

“I am looking for some people with whom you could go,” the lama told me, “Don't be in such a big hurry.”



Whenever I visited the lama, I observed that he did not have much free time. So, I had to wait a few more months. Meanwhile, he invited me to stay at Drepung itself while he conducted a religious service. He gave me a room for myself. There must be about 5,000 monks as well as four Chinese novices at Drepung. After the service, I returned to Lhasa.

The lama said when I called on him the next time: "No one is going to China just now. However, you have lost your sleep and your patience. But you don't even know the Chinese language. What shall I do?"

"Kindly do as much as you can," I implored him once more, "I don't need much but I would like to go as early as possible."

He was lost in thought for a while. Then he called his Chinese secretary and instructed him, "Write some letters to the people in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Peking, Nanking and Wu Tai Shan. The man took paper, pen and ink and entered his room. He reappeared soon with eight letters in Chinese language for the lama's approval. The lama then sent for one yard of yellow cotton cloth, with which a bag was made and Chinese characters were written all over it.

Giving me the letters and the bag, the lama said: "If you meet the people to whom the letters are addressed you don't have to worry. They will help you. However, if, by any chance, you miss them, stand at the crossroads with the bag hanging from your neck. Keep silent and count your beads.

Someone will come to help you. You can be sure of that. What more can I do for you since you don't want to wait until I can go? I believe you will come to no harm, as you have not the least fear in travelling so far. The most important thing in the world is the mind." He also gave me 30 rupees. And his last words were, "Now, you may go. You will come to no harm."

I returned to Lhasa and went to see Tshering Tashi. "You have introduced me to a great lama," I told him, "He gave me these letters and this bag. Now, I am sure to get to Pancasirsha." Tashi was very pleased and he asked me to see him once more before my departure. Soon I was back at my place at Phorankha and within a couple of days I took leave of all my friends and returned with my belongings to Lhasa, where I stayed with my nephew, Tulsi Ratna, at Nankana.

Once more it was a round of visits to my friends and each of them gave me some money for my journey. Finally, I went to see Tashi. "I am leaving the day after tomorrow," I told him and he also gave me some money. I had now 250 rupees in total. It was enough for my travel, I thought.

With a porter carrying some provisions, I left Lhasa on the full moon day of Chaitra, fully a year after my arrival on May 19, 1934. At long last I was on my way to China by the sea route.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The legendary founder of the valley of Nepal, who is believed to have come from China.

<sup>2</sup> In Wu Tai county, Shanxi Province, China.

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- <sup>3</sup> In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of Newars went to Kusinagar to be ordained as monks in the Theravada tradition, for this practice has ceased long ago in Nepal.
- <sup>4</sup> A famous Indian writer with a versatile personality who contributed much to the revival of Buddhism in India by his literary works.
- <sup>5</sup> Literally the “Jewel in the Lotus,” it is a very popular Sanskrit mantra or prayer in Tibet and Nepal
- <sup>6</sup> It is customary to go around a shrine, stupa, temple or sacred hill clockwise as a way of showing respect to the deity enshrined therein.

# A MERCHANT'S LETTER TO HIS WIFE

Chittadhar 'Hridaya'

*Chittadhar 'Hridaya' (Chittadhar Tuladhar, 1906–1973) belonged to an old family with business interests in Tibet. The establishment in Lhasa was closed in 1933 when his father, Drabyadhar, retired and returned to Kathmandu. He began as a businessman but later having devoted himself entirely to the promotion of the Newari language, he achieved fame as a poet and prolific writer. He founded the literary society, **Nepal Bhasha Parishad**, and the magazine **Nepal Ritupau**.*

*Inspired by Stefan Zweig's 1922 novella **Brief einer Unbekannten** (Letter from an Unknown Woman), he wrote a novel, **Mimmanah Pau**, in the form of a letter from a Newar merchant in Lhasa to his wife in Kathmandu. An excerpt from the novel, describing the travel from Kathmandu to Lhasa, translated from the original in Newari, is included in this book.*

THE road from Kalimpong had not opened yet. So, it was necessary to travel at great risk along the Kuti<sup>1</sup> road. One had to go across very scary suspension bridges and walk along hillsides that suddenly collapsed. One never knew whether one would ever return home from a journey to Tibet. Therefore, all the relatives came with the traditional farewell gifts. A bowlful of hard-boiled eggs was received as *sagam*, an expression of their good wishes and prayers for a safe journey. But you

missed all the hectic activity going on in the house, for you kept to yourself in the room, sobbing all the time. When you came at last to say farewell to me, two women had to support you. As I gave you the customary farewell gift of a one-rupee coin,<sup>2</sup> you glanced up at me in great anguish and you were shaking. Your trembling hands held my legs firmly and long when you reverently placed your head upon my feet in a gesture<sup>3</sup> of farewell. You were utterly helpless then. How vividly I remember it even now! Your tears had stained my white socks and I was heartbroken too.

We spent that night at Chabahi.<sup>4</sup> On the following day we reached Sako and stayed overnight at Mahadyobaha. On the third day, we arrived at Lagacho<sup>5</sup> at about 10 o'clock in the morning. It was customary to stop by the stupa there for yet another ritual of offering *sagam*. So, our friends and relatives who had accompanied us so far made the two *banja* or assistants and myself as well as the chief of the porters stand in a line and offered hard-boiled eggs and small cupfuls of curd. We had all along received *sagam* half a dozen times already- at every floor of the house on the evening of our departure from home, at Dhondigu<sup>6</sup> and at Chabahi. There was only a very slight difference. At Lagacho, we were made to stand to receive the blessed egg and curd, elsewhere we sat down on the floor.

To my surprise, the chief porter packed up the leftovers of the *sagam* and other refreshments that we had been served with the explanation that these could be our lunch on the following day. I learnt that from then onwards there would be no caste<sup>7</sup> distinction among us. Not even the food that had touched someone's lips would be taboo. Finally, we

circumambulated the stupa and came down the hill while our relatives and friends went down the way we had come. We were not supposed to look behind and we did not.

At every downward step, our mind travelled back home. It was true for all of us, for we had homes and someone to remember in each home. Moreover, one had a son and another a daughter. Only my affection was not divided, for we had no child of our own yet. Your face kept haunting me all the time. My imagination ran unbridled and my eyes became moist. I looked at my companions and I seemed to see my own reflection in their eyes.

However unwilling we were, we had to keep moving. We went round and over the mountains. Sometimes we were distracted by the flowering trees along the trail. We could also hear birds in the nearby bushes or people singing in the distance. But we continued to be heavy in our heart. By the time we reached the bank of the Yeranku<sup>8</sup> it was time to cook the evening meal. After supper and until sleep overcame us, we tried to learn a few Tibetan words: *thukpa* (soup), *dre* (rice). *punkya* (brothers and sisters), *kime* (wife), *nga* (I), *kherong* (you), *khorang* (he), etc.

The next morning we prepared our breakfast of whatever we had saved from lunch the previous day. Then we got into a canoe and crossed the river. We climbed up the hill the whole day. The path went through forests and we found it quite pleasant. Occasionally we heard the music of a waterfall, and in the evening we came to the village of Sipa. The next day we arrived at Chautara. There was a government office in the town. I met some Newar merchants who knew my father. One of them took us

to his home and we stayed overnight with him. He inquired about my health and then touched my heart by asking: "Are you married? How many children do you have?" How could I answer him? I just kept smiling when one of my companions told him about you. "Don't be so sad," said our host, "Everything will be all right once you reach Lhasa." A sigh escaped me and I said to myself that I could never forget you.

There were distractions every now and then. Our own porters as well as the people who dwelt in these mountains conspired to devise ways to beguile us young Newars. Sometimes they sang songs for us or even made us join in their dances. One day I found a strip of cloth hanging above a narrow path. It was a *kayata*<sup>9</sup> or loincloth, and of course, it would be an ignominy to walk under that. Rocks could be seen poised ready to tumble down any moment from a great height while far below flowed a river in full spate. It was not a place to linger. We had to pay a small amount to some local boys to have the offending cloth removed from the branch of a tree.

Sometimes we came to a river between two mountain ranges linked by a cable, from which dangled a bamboo basket high above the water. The basket was used to carry goods across the river, but on occasions a porter in a hurry got into it while a second man pulled him to the other side. We were told that accidents often took place when there was a slack in the rope and the basket plunged down to the river. It looked very risky and we made long detours to avoid such crossings.

Thus, we travelled, joking with the porters and apparently happy, even though we were sad deep

down in our heart, until we came to Tatopani, the place named after a hot spring, and where the checkpoint was located. So, we didn't have to climb up to Listi, where the checkpoint was located previously. We paid the customs duty and spent the night at Tatopani. The next morning we had a bath in the hot spring, from which three streams of very hot, steaming water issued. We dipped our hands and feet gradually in the spring. It took quite some time before we were able to get into the water. We resumed the journey after our bath.

From Tatopani we went down to the Kodari river, which we had seen from a distance. As we stepped into the bridge, we were told that we were crossing the border between Nepal and Tibet. I was quite overcome with emotion. I felt that I was really going away from my country, my mother and you. However, there was nothing I could do but to offer my tears as a tribute to the river that flowed beneath the bridge and climbed the mountain on the other side in Tibet. We were not carrying much with us. One of my companions had a bag containing a few packets of dry fruits and sweets while another had a *khukri* knife and a water bottle. I had a bundle containing a symbol of Bhindyo,<sup>10</sup> the patron saint of traders, tied around my waist. Our money was with the chief porter. Although we were travelling so lightly, the knowledge that we had left our country made our feet very heavy. In the evening we came to Khasa, the last village where we found the sloping roofs as in Nepal. However, the roof was made of shingles, as there were trees in plenty.

The scene along the route was varied; we came to places where nothing but huge boulders lay everywhere, as if we had arrived at the mythical river



of stones called Silanadi, elsewhere we saw slender waterfalls rushing down the mountain in milky foams. Sometimes the river lay far below, a mere ribbon, while narrow planks served as a bridge high above it. It was quite frightening to walk across the planks merely an arm's length in width on a swinging bridge. An iron chain helped to some extent by providing hand holds. It reminded me of the saying that no man knows where his end will come. It would come true if a man were to tumble down the bridge.

We stopped overnight at a place called Choyam. The following day we crossed range after range where we didn't see any large trees. In the late afternoon we arrived at Kuti, the first trading center on the road from Nepal to Lhasa. It is said that Kuti had at one time 40 Newar trading houses. Salt, wool and yak tails were the main items of trade in Kuti. Goods from India were also available in some of the shops.

The porters who had carried our merchandise delivered their loads to their chief, the *nayabhu*, as he is called, and prepared to return home, each carrying a basketful of salt with the money they had received as wages. The *nayabhu* exchanged our Nepalese rupees for Tibetan money and paid the *khayama* or muleteer in advance for the pack animals to carry our merchandise to Lhasa. He also gave instructions to the *khayama* to take good care of myself, telling him that it was my first journey to Tibet. With that he returned from Kuti, carrying with him a letter from me addressed to my mother.

Surrounded by mountains, Kuti was a bleak, cold valley, covered with snow during the winter, when all the roads were blocked and none came out of their homes. Even in May, it was as cold as during the winter in Nepal. We had to put the local woollen blankets over the quilts we had brought with us in order to sleep. We stayed in Kuti for some days and met the Newars living in the town. Many of them were from Sankhu. A couple of men from Patan had shops in which they sold gold and silver ornaments or made these to order.

Most houses were two storied, with a flat top made by piling up clay. Because of the extreme cold, the clay stayed frozen and it was leak-proof like cement. Flags fluttered on poles everywhere. There was a shrine dedicated to Bhindyo, decorated with banners and flags as in a monastery. There was a Nepalese government official with the rank of Dittha, who looked after all matters concerning merchants and porters from Nepal. With the Newar presence, of course, Kuti also had festivals and musical bands organized by their own *guthi* or associations as in Kathmandu valley.

On our last day in Kuti, all the Newars came to our lodging. They declared that there would be a farewell ceremony for us. Tea was served to everyone. A middle-aged merchant, apparently the leader among those present, said, "Now, *thakali*, what do we do now?" I looked around wondering which elderly man he meant by *thakali* but it was our host, a much younger person, who answered, "Well, bring out the book."

A book with a red cover<sup>11</sup> was soon produced and the *thakali* began to read it: "On a

certain date, a certain *na-Newa* banja of a certain merchant arrived from Nepal and executed two somersaults;<sup>12</sup> on a certain date, a certain *na-Newa* executed two somersaults; on a certain date, a certain *na-Newa* merchant arrived from Nepal and paid five rupees, and so on and so forth.” Then, to my consternation the man turned towards me and asked, “Will you do the customary somersault or make a payment?” It reminded me of the somersaults that the local pranksters made the poor pilgrims do in the streets of Kathmandu when they arrived for the annual festival of Shivaratri.<sup>13</sup> Nonplussed, I just kept silent. Then someone in the crowd made a suggestion: “We shouldn’t ask a merchant’s son to do a somersault. Note down a payment of five rupees.” Accordingly, five rupees were mentioned against my name in the book. The names of my two banjas were also mentioned; one of them qualified as an old Newar and he was not required to do a somersault nor pay a fine, the second man executed a somersault to the great amusement of the assembly. Later, I learnt that if a merchant happened to arrive in Kuti at the time of an annual feast, he had to pay for it. All the Newars in town took part in the feast, which lasted three or four days. He was also obliged to make a somersault upon a raw sheepskin laid out on the ground to amuse his countrymen.

While all these activities were going on, the old Newar banja took out a Tibetan garment from a chest covered with yak hide and asked me to wear it. The packs were then loaded on three horses. The *theba* carried the chest. We took leave of the assembly and rode out of Kuti.

We saw large flocks of tiny sheep high up in the mountains and heard the tinkling of bells made by

caravans of mules and donkeys. Perhaps, to other people moving about in the mountains, we would also have appeared as small as ants as we made our way, producing similar sounds. So we went on, day after day, until we approached Lhasa.

We are certainly true to our Newar character wherever we go, whether just beyond the Kathmandu valley or as far away as Lhasa. Large crowds of kinsmen and friends are ever ready to see off or receive people. It was therefore not surprising to find a crowd of Newars at Chyanakheo, an open space on the outskirts of Lhasa, waiting for our arrival. There were many in the crowd that I didn't know, but all of them had some connection with our business. All the people sat down in a circle, introductions were made and good wishes exchanged. Two Tibetan women produced a plate with various ritual offerings as well as hard-boiled eggs for an auspicious occasion.

The thakali of our *pala* or the social organization to which we belonged put a red<sup>14</sup> cap upon my head while a priest recited a hymn wishing me health, happiness and prosperity by the grace of the gods. The same hymn was recited at the farewell ceremony at home and it had sounded so mournful that my heart almost broke. Now it was different. Was it because the priest himself was happy at our arrival in Lhasa? Was it because our long journey of more than a month and half during which we didn't meet any relative or friend was over? Finding ourselves among Newars again, we were very delighted indeed. After the ritual welcome, all of us walked towards the city.

A gate surmounted by a large, white stupa stood between the Potala and Chagpori. On either

side of the gate hawkers displayed their wares on the ground. There were some eating-places too and the place resounded with pony hoofs and cycle bells. It was quite a busy place; many people carried prayer wheels and beads as they went their different ways.

We were taken along the main street of Lhasa. It was called Barkor and it was a busy market place by the principal monastery known as Jo-khang. Accompanied by all the members of our *pala*, friends and kinsmen, I finally reached our own kothi or establishment and met father, who had been waiting for me for so long. I had not seen him for a decade and was so overwhelmed by happiness, I felt as if I had come to heaven. Controlling my tears with great effort, I offered him the two silver coins that Mother had given me when she put the ceremonial red cap on my head at the time of my departure from home. And then I touched his feet with my head in great reverence.

All the *pala* members were invited to stay for dinner at our place. After they had eaten, they said to me, "Well, you must be tired having arrived but this day." Yet they stayed on asking me about events in Nepal until it was midnight.

On the following days I had a busy time meeting with our Tibetan friends. After an exchange of courtesies, some inquired about the merchandise I had brought from Kathmandu. One of our *banja* showed them the turquoise, coral and brocade. Other items, such as broadcloth, peacock feather, fans, bells, prayer beads, bowls, rice, sugar candy, red chilly, ginger, etc. had not arrived yet. I found that both men and women were equally good in business. Some of the women were quite young and they

embarrassed me by sitting next to me as if they didn't mind it at all.

One morning we were taken to pay homage to our *pala aju*, the protective deity of our local society, at a house located in a courtyard some distance from our own place. The party consisted of the priest, the thakali, his deputy and some members of the pala. We climbed up a staircase and entered a room. The altar consisted of a mirror and a pot filled with *thom*. The pot itself was covered with various ornaments and a curtain decorated with gold and silver plumes hung behind it on the wall. I was told to empty the pot. Accordingly, I poured the contents into another pot and refilled it. The priest lighted the silver lamp we had brought along with us and made an offering of ritual food at the altar. I was then told to offer a silver coin<sup>15</sup> at the altar and touch it with my head. The two banja who had come with me were also asked to do the same after me. We were then given a drink of *thom* from the pot and some of the ritual food to eat. Having done that, we came back from the place.

I am now a full-fledged member of the pala and ready to carry on the business in father's footsteps...

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The road from Kathmandu to Kuti in Tibet was the principal route to Lhasa from Nepal for centuries.
- <sup>2</sup> It is a custom to give small cash presents to members of the family or others, specially the younger ones, at the time of departure.

- <sup>3</sup> Touching the feet with the head, or lowering the head, is a traditional way of greeting or of saying farewell to senior family members.
- <sup>4</sup> A historic site on the outskirts of Kathmandu city, named after Charumati, a daughter of Emperor Ashoka, who lived there and built a Buddhist temple for herself.
- <sup>5</sup> A small stupa still marks the site in the pass leading from Lapsiphedhi on the trail leading east from the town of Sako or Sankhu.
- <sup>6</sup> An ancient Buddhist site on the eastern outskirts of Kathmandu city.
- <sup>7</sup> The Newars have a caste system based on birth and observed with restrictions on marriage and eating with peoples of unequal castes.
- <sup>8</sup> The Newar name for the river Indrawati in Sindhupalchok district adjoining Kathmandu valley.
- <sup>9</sup> Every Newar boy is given a loincloth in a ceremony to mark his coming of age; after the rituals, he is treated as an adult and a full member of his community.
- <sup>10</sup> The Newar name for Bhimsen, renowned for his physical strength, who is regarded as their patron by Newar merchants. He is one of the five legendary brothers of Mahabharat fame.
- <sup>11</sup> A book of records traditionally has a cover of red cloth.
- <sup>12</sup> A merry prank played for diversion.
- <sup>13</sup> A day sacred to Lord Shiva, which falls in February-March, and on which Indians in large numbers visit the temple of Pashupati in Kathmandu.
- <sup>14</sup> Red is a colour of joy and an auspicious moment while white is the colour of sorrow and mourning.
- <sup>15</sup> It is customary to make small cash offerings at shrines.



# A TIBETAN ODYSSEY

## Nhuchhe Bahadur Bajracharya

*Nhuchhe Bahadur Bajracharya (1920-) is a teacher who is also active in Buddhist movements and world peace organizations. He is co-founder of Ananda Kuti Vidyapeeth (school) and Founder-Principal of Maitri Shishu Vidyalaya, and Vice-President of Ananda Kuti Trust, a Buddhist organization, in Kathmandu. He has travelled extensively and in 1950, he visited Tibet as a private tutor to a Tibetan merchant.*

*An excerpt from his autobiography, in English, **The Story of My Life** (1998) is included in this book.*

### **Kalimpong**

IN 1949, there were quite a few young and affluent Tibetans in Kalimpong. Most of them were engaged in trade of one sort or another. A few among them approached me with the suggestion that I conduct English tuition classes for them. That was something after my own heart and I gave my consent. The classes began soon after, and the few students I had seemed well pleased with my teaching. A little extra money came into my possession as a result.

Sandu Chhang was one such Tibetan student. He was approaching middle age at the time. He was a wealthy trader who bought Tibetan wool from places far and near, and exported it to the U.S.A. It was a very lucrative trade in those days. I

allotted two hours each day for teaching him English. Soon we developed a very close personal friendship, and he proved a very helpful person in many ways in the years to come.

The year 1949 was drawing to a close, when word reached Sandu Chhang that he had to proceed to Tibet forthwith on a wool-buying mission. By then he had become so thoroughly engrossed in his English lessons that he was distinctly unwilling to have the routine disrupted. Even then, he was very reluctant to suggest that I accompany him on his business trip. He thought that it was a sensitive matter. But when he finally made up his mind to ask me how I felt about travelling with him, I was only too happy to do as he wished. In fact I was very enthusiastic at the prospect of an expense paid Tibetan Odyssey. I had wished for long to travel in that country and have a look at Lhasa, its capital, and now there was this heaven-sent opportunity to do just that. And what is more, I was assured of the best possible company of an excellent guide in the person of Sandu Chhang. Having travelled all over the region several times, he was thoroughly conversant with all the particulars relating to the entire route and important places on the way to the Tibetan capital. That was a great advantage, as the terrain we had to negotiate was known for its rough and hostile character. Added to that was the concrete benefit of Sandu Chhang undertaking to continue the payment of my monthly remuneration for tuition, besides the frequent ex-gratia payment of all sums of money by way of bonus, accompanied by the major bounty of the total travel expenses underwritten by him. It was without a doubt an adventure and an experience to look forward to.

We were on our way early in 1950. Now, it so happened that was also the beginning stage of the Sino-Tibetan confrontation, something that developed into a serious political dispute with the Chinese calling the tune, while the Tibetan potential for a counter thrust steadily waned. The outcome was, Tibet lost its autonomous status, and the Buddhist hierarchy its right to manage Tibetan people's temporal and spiritual affairs in ways they deemed fit and proper. The arrival of the Chinese on the scene spelled the sudden end of an era in history. The sporadic military operations were confined to the border dividing Tibet and China. When the first bout of overt upheaval subsided, a Chinese political delegation travelled to Lhasa to negotiate a settlement. It proved an abortive attempt just like all political moves of the kind leading thereby to an unresolved stalemate. In the meantime our own private venture progressed without let or hindrance. We broke journey at several places. Wool-trading centers peppered the route all along the way. There was seemingly an abundant stock of the merchandise everywhere, and it was evidently profitable for a seasoned merchant like my friend to stop at as many places as possible and make purchases in bulk at bargain prices.

## **Phari**

Phari was one of the most important of such centers. We were to remain there for three long months. Located at an altitude of 14,000 feet above mean sea level, Phari wore a bleak and depressing air. This busy and bustling hub of trade for Tibet, India, Sikkim and Bhutan was innocent of all vegetation and greenery. It was a regular desert tract, wind-swept and frozen all the year round.

Even in that remote and desolate place Sandu Chhang owned a house of his own, and we took shelter there during our prolonged stay. Our daily routine consisted of two major occupations. He was such a dedicated student even in such a place, and in the midst of pressing business that demanded all his attention constantly, that he never missed even a single two-hour session of English lessons each day. Then there was the primary business of making the purchase of the largest quantity of wool at the most advantageous price, and in the process make Sandu Chhang and his four brothers that little bit more wealthy.

From Phari we went to Khambu Chutsen. As had by now become our custom we covered the short distance on mule back. Part of the rider's bedding and bundle of personal belongings served as saddle while the rest of it was spread evenly down both the flanks of the animal. The stock of wool was flung across the back and sides of the pack animals, which were also the same kind of mules used for riding. To start with, we had motored our way to Gangtok in Sikkim in a jeep, and the mules were pressed into service for the rest of the journey, as motorable roads were absent from that point onwards.

Khambu Chutsen was a day's journey from Phari. There was a celebrated spa there. Its hot water spring and lake were credited with healing properties, especially for skin diseases. We spent a whole month there. I thoroughly enjoyed the holiday, just like the other visitors camping there. A circular structure encircled the lake. It had no windows on its outer wall. That ensured that no one standing outside could get a view of what was going on in the enclosed area.

The structure served as comfortable shelters for the large number of people who regularly thronged to the place to avail themselves of the facilities for bathing, resting and relaxing, besides the opportunity of ridding themselves of serious skin ailments.

On my first day there, I was quite surprised to discover that all bathers, irrespective of their sex, stripped to the skin before leaping into the water, and once in the lake, only their heads showed above the water. As soon as they were done with one spell of bathing, they scrambled out of the water and hurriedly wrapped blankets around their wet bodies. After partaking of the good, nourishing food and beverages available right on the banks of the lake itself, they peeled off the blankets and once again leapt into the water for another healing, energizing dip.

While we were still camping at Khambu Chutsen, a message was delivered to Sandu Chhang. He had to go post-haste to Kalimpong. There was pressing business there, which needed his personal attention. We immediately packed up and returned to Phari, where plans were expeditiously made for his trip to Kalimpong. I had in the meantime succeeded in persuading him to permit me to travel to Lhasa, something I had been eagerly looking forward to ever since we set out from Gangtok. At first he was reluctant to grant my wish, but I persisted in pressing my case, until he gave in, if a trifle reluctantly.

### **En route to Lhasa**

Before taking leave of me and setting out on his return journey to Kalimpong, Sandu Chhang made prudent and adequate arrangement for my safe

and comfortable journey to Lhasa. He also wrote to his four brothers in the Tibetan capital to take good care of me once I got there. He engaged three servants to accompany me. That necessitated the hiring of four mules to carry us all in addition to our belongings and provisions. Usually mules and muleteers for the purpose were hired in Gangtok. It was normal practice on such occasions for the muleteer, who in the first instance had supplied the mules, to join the travellers' party. His duties were to look after the animals, while at the same time to be the guide and guard to the caravan of wealthy travellers. Most of the people who undertook those journeys through Tibet were merchants and their agents. They almost invariably took with them large quantities of valuable merchandise on such trips. The services and close attendance of competent and experienced armed guards were therefore an absolute must, in order to keep at bay the highwaymen and gangs of bandits who infested the route. Such outlaws made a good living by preying upon the odd unwary traveller. Murders and grievous injury were not unheard of in such lawless territories. The muleteers always took along with them a pack of large Tibetan dogs to help them in their onerous task.

Nobody really ever contemplated travelling all alone through Tibet. So it was in the fitness of things that I joined a caravan. The party consisted of 15 men, 75 mules, most of which carried the cargo, and four dogs. Hiring a mule for such a journey cost anything between Rs.1,200/- and Rs.1,500/-. The night halts were known as *nechan*. While the travellers made preparations for the night's rest, their servants and the muleteers busied themselves, heaping together the personal luggage and merchandise belonging to them in large piles, before

covering each pile with a tarpaulin to protect the goods against possible rain. The dogs were then ordered to mount guard till daybreak. To my servants I was *gheghela*, the respected teacher, while the merchants were addressed as *sotala*. The suffix *la* denoted respect.

We covered a long stretch of arid, unpopulated territory during the first day of our journey. No lodgings, homes or restaurants were to be seen anywhere on the way. So when in the evening we came across a place where a few people lived it did not take us long to decide we had found the place for our *nechan*. I was told the village was called Dhwila. My three attendants looked after me very well. They fetched water and made my bed, besides cooking my supper, putting to good use the stock of rice, dried vegetables, lentils, tea and sugar.

We left Dhwila the next morning to resume our journey through desert tracts. It was sheer good fortune that enabled me to remain all in one piece at the end of the day's toils, for the most awful experience, which very nearly spelt my death, lay in wait for me around midday, in the middle of nowhere. Small bushes were seen in a few places along our route. Otherwise it was a flat, barren desert that we traversed all day. Our caravan stopped for a few minutes every now and then beside one such bush in order to revive our flagging spirits by drinking tea brewed over fire made with dry twigs and leaves furnished by the bush. This practice helped to conserve the limited stock of kerosene oil we carried for use in the stoves.

It was after one such tea break that I had a terrible accident. When all of us had our tea and were



preparing to mount the mules to proceed on our journey, I felt the urge to ease my bowels. I asked my companions not to wait for me but to move on. I assured them I would rejoin them in no time. But misfortune befell me. After relieving myself, I was getting ready to mount the accursed animal, when it decided to take off at full speed. If it had done that before I had stuck one of my feet into the stirrup, I would not have come to any physical harm. But the beast bolted only after the stirrup had trapped my foot and I was dragged along the rock-strewn path at breakneck speed. I howled in pain and terror. The mule was apparently hell-bent upon destroying me; it merely increased its pace. My head ached and I groaned in my misery. My whole body seemed ready to disintegrate. It was evident the mule felt lonesome and scared, while impatiently waiting to gallop ahead and rejoin the rest of the animals. It could not have done so on its own because as was the usual practice, I had tethered it firmly to a large boulder with its reins while I was engaged in other ways for a little while.

I figured it was all of a fateful and tortuous quarter hour before my benumbed foot extricated itself from the stirrup. I lay still, moaning on the ground, while the beast raced away from where I had fallen. My body was badly battered and I could not move at all, and in another moment I was in a dead swoon. So I did not see my servants when they came looking for me. They had taken fright when they saw the mule gallop into the midst of the other animals in the caravan. They feared the worst, and came running to where I lay. After I came to, they told me what a terrible fright I had given them. They explained that it was quite some time before I showed signs of regaining consciousness, and that happy event came

about as a result of the vigorous massage they gave my whole body and head with a medicated ointment. The aches and pains were unbearable.

I was lucky that no bones were broken, and no greater physical damage was evident than bruises and scratches. It was obviously the heavy clothes and thick woollen cap I wore, which prevented greater damage. It was also a slice of good fortune that prevented the goggles from shattering and hurting my eyes and face. I sat up and gratefully sipped the hot tea they handed me. Soon I felt fit and ready to mount the seemingly saner mule that they had so thoughtfully brought for me. However, for a few days, the servants had to lift me bodily and place me on the saddle, for I was quite unable to mount and dismount without assistance.

To digress for a moment, it has been mentioned already that the route we had taken was a notorious one, as it was infested with robbers. So most of the travellers used to carry arms of one kind or another, mainly swords, pistols and rifles. The muleteers themselves, who necessarily shouldered the greatest responsibility, usually carried big caliber firearms. Fortunately we did not encounter any thug on our way. But we were on edge while negotiating the most dangerous section of bandit country named Thang or Kalaphant. It was a windswept desert tract. High winds of awesome velocity rose each day at around noon, rendering travel impossible. So it was imperative that travellers put the region behind them before the high winds rose. Our party got up at three in the morning on that day, determined to traverse the tricky plains and reach safer territory before that dreaded hour. We made it at 11 A.M.

By midday we reached a small village. There were a few small houses there, and the people living there turned out to be among the most hospitable folks we encountered on our long journey. It was a pleasant experience, eating lunch in their company. But before that, we were served delicious Tibetan tea, which contained a small quantity of butter and salt also, besides tea.

There the servants gave me a good rub down, putting to excellent purpose the very efficacious balm our good hosts had brought out of their medicine chest. The massage positively helped me overcome fatigue and aches to a certain extent.

Interminably long stretches of territory we covered were in the grip of very high icy winds and freezing cold. Therefore, in order to keep body temperature at the desirable level, and ensure proper blood circulation, travellers were encouraged to dismount and walk briskly alongside their mounts from time to time. Stories about travellers having frozen to death while still being seated firmly in the saddle, freely circulated in and around such inhospitable regions. I for one could never satisfactorily verify such traveller's tales. However considering the terrible climatic conditions obtaining in such places, I would not put such occurrences beyond the realm of possibility.

Our next nechan was at a place called Khama. One had to negotiate very dangerous terrain to get there. No one in his right senses ever traversed at night the narrow, deep canyon known as Jhara on the outskirts of Khama. The best time to do so was early morning. Tall, snow-clad mountain peaks on both sides of the canyon cast a disconcertingly dark

shadow over the gloomy place. Landslides capable of causing large-scale death and destruction were not too rare. To add to it all, the craggy nature of the hillside offered excellent hiding places for bandits of all kinds, besides enabling them to avail of the logistic facility to open fire on passersby before robbing them.

After getting past Jhara without any mishap, we decided to spend the night in a small village, which boasted of a few houses. We would have preferred instead to travel a little farther and put more distance between us and the dacoit-infested belt, but that was not feasible, for the shadows of late evening were already long, and besides, the nearest threat-free village lay a considerable distance away. So we were compelled to make the most of a bad bargain and avail of the relative security and comforts the tiny village had to offer. We were cautioned that the dacoits very often arrived there and attacked and robbed wayfarers. The *modus operandi* was to enter the village in the guise of harmless travellers and survey the place to identify prospective victims among the genuine guests spending the night there. Later under cover of darkness the bandits attacked the defenseless victims and decamped with their money and other valuable possessions. The wild and desolate mountains offered the marauders ample cover and protection.

With such unsettling thoughts uppermost in our troubled minds, few of us got a good night's rest. We slept, as the saying goes, with one eye open, lest we were taken by surprise in the dead of night. Members of our party took turns in mounting guard, while throughout the night oil lamps shed their flickering light over us and all around us. We had

torchlights to help us in emergencies, but they were only sparingly used, in order to lengthen the life of precious batteries.

In spite of all such elaborate preparations, we could not escape an altogether spine-chilling and hair-raising experience that eerie night! The terrified shriek of a companion rudely shook us out of our disturbed slumber. Uttering muffled shouts, we sprang to our feet in an instant. As torchlights flashed in all directions, men grabbed their weapons, and the frantic search for the intruders began. But none was found. And the simple reason was no outsider had stolen into our camp. The stir was the outcome of the alarm caused by the feverish working of a distraught brain belonging to one of our own friends. The person who had let out the blood-curdling cry had merely imagined he was under attack from the dreaded enemy. After the hubbub had finally subsided, he explained: "I was fast asleep, or I thought I was. Then suddenly I thought I had been shot by someone, and I ran my trembling fingers over my face and forehead. Terrified as I was, I felt blood streaming down from a bullet wound in my head! Then I screamed, and you know what happened after that." He concluded with a weak, wan grin. Our investigation soon established the real cause of our friend's frenzied reaction. The state of his terrified mind denied him much needed repose after the previous day's toils and anxieties. A nightmare was the result. When he dreamt that he was set upon by armed thugs, he tried to defend himself as best as he could. In the process, his flailing arms brought down upon his head the lamp in the niche. While the flame singed his hair, the oil spilled all over his forehead and face. That was all that had happened.

Once calm and order were restored, the local people told us how everyone was afraid even to communicate freely with strangers, for fear of being tricked by robbers in disguise.

## **Pyete Lake**

Another day's journey brought us to the huge fresh water lake known as Pyete. It was so large that it took us all of two days to skirt its expanse and reach the opposite side. We traversed some of the most picturesque tracts during those two days. It was one of the wonderful experiences of our long and arduous journey through Tibetan territory. The enthralling nature of the sights was the result of the constant presence of a large variety of feathered species which hovered over our heads and the sparkling waters of the marvelous Pyete as also the breathtaking beauty of verdant vegetation enriched and garnished by flowering plants and shrubs in gorgeous bloom. The rays of the bright sun on a clear, cloudless day caressed the gently rippling surface of the placid lake, bestowing on it the silvery sheen that held one's admiring attention all the way. All of us, as a result, felt our spirits being suddenly lifted, especially as the change for the better had come overnight, in the wake of a spell of unmitigated dreary surroundings and experiences over a long period of time. We felt so cheerful and relaxed, we dismounted often to savour the pleasant feeling within us all and sip the tea made in such an agreeable environment.

The next nechan was at Damoli village, situated on the banks of the lake. The people there proved a delightful lot. They received us by first putting *khata* around our necks. After that we were

served the mildly intoxicating *chang* with which to slake our thirst and revive our spirits.

We were told by our good hosts that during mid-winter travellers crossed the lake in a single day, riding straight across its hard frozen surface. In the autumn of 1950, it took us two days to accomplish the task for obvious reasons as related.

The brief period of relaxed composure, good fellowship and goodwill for all came to an end as suddenly as it had dawned on us. The first day's progress after leaving the banks of Pyete Lake was a slow one. That was inevitable, too, on account of the nature of the topography of the region. We had to climb a large number of small hills, all along the way. After reaching the summit of each one, employing laborious effort, we had to negotiate the slope on the other side. So it went all day long - climbing, descending, climbing again. Even then, the exercise was not nearly as hazardous an experience as had been many of our more tough and dangerous tasks previously.

Next we came to the village of Dhampa Pachi at the foot of an 18,000- foot high mountain peak. We took a long, admiring look at it and decided to spend the night right there. We had to revive our spirits and get ready to climb its snow-clad steep and dangerous face the next day.

We found climbing as tricky and risky as we were told it would be. But we girded our loins and summoned our gritty, resolute spirit to surmount that new challenge just as we had got the better of many a threat and hurdle already. The people of Dhampa Pachi had warned us not to be complacent once we

reached the summit, for, they said, the slope on the other side was almost equally difficult to tackle. The tricky, narrow winding path that we took to ascend the mountain was not only rough and uneven, but also verged on one side to a sheer drop. It was truly an unnerving sight, the awesome gapping, and bottomless trap at one's very elbow, all the way up the mountainside! And my mule, an animal I never learnt to like, proved to be anything but an understanding or cooperative mount. Every time I tugged at its reins in a desperate attempt to persuade the beast to keep to the middle of the path, it refused to budge an inch from the edge of the precipice in the most obvious demonstration of mulish obstinacy. I gave up all attempts in that direction soon enough, and decided to entrust my life and the outcome of the day's adventures to the fates and the exasperating beast, in equal measure. I need not have worried, for by evening, we were safely in the valley on the other side of the mountain. We were plainly more fortunate than many others who had perished in the attempt to cross that barrier, lashed as it was by guests of winds and snowstorms most of the time and hailstorms were not altogether unknown in those parts either.

## **Crossing the Brahmaputra**

At this point, I must pay a brief tribute to a wonderful, natural spectacle. For the first time on that journey we had a marvelous view of that magnificent river Brahmaputra from the top of the mountain. It lay way below and seemed to us from that great height, to be indolently winding its lazy course in a spirit of absolute calm. But that was an illusion, which was soon dispelled when we descended the slope of the mountain and came closer to the mighty



river. Its currents were in fact swift and its passage a stirring and raucously turbulent one.

The Brahmaputra valley offered us an ideal place to take rest at night. Crossing the broad breast of the river took our party of 15 men and 75 mules the whole of the next day. There was only one ferryboat. It had the head of a horse for a motif at one end, and that of its tail in the rear, but what was of more concrete consequence to us was that it could carry only seven men and just a very few mules, and a proportionate quantity of cargo on a single trip across the river. There was nothing to do but to take things easy and remain patient. In any event it presented us with an opportunity to take in at our leisure the grandeur of splendid scenery all day long. The boat took two hours to make a single crossing.

We were nearing the end of our journey, for only some three or four more days' travel remained to be endured. There was yet another thought that gladdened our hearts. The terrain lying ahead of us was a considerably more friendly and hospitable one. Pleasant looking villages and even a few larger human habitations peppered the route. Soon, green vegetation in the shape of bushes and trees with thick, fleshy leaves became a common sight. The entire journey from Phari to Lhasa took 17 days and 16 nights.

When we reached the suburbs of the Tibetan capital, a large and bustling throng of people came to welcome the travellers. They were their relatives, friends and partners. Barring me, all others in our party were traders, and naturally, the welcoming party also was comprised of the members of the same occupational group. On rare occasions, a caravan

travelling to Lhasa used to have a political agent and his retinue as its constituents, because Nepal has a political agent in that city.

In those days, only very rarely did Tibetans take to trade for an occupation, and it was mostly left to Newars to deal in the buying and selling of merchandise of all kinds. Sandu Chhang was therefore to be seen as an exception. It is quite possible, he took to that vocation after coming into contact with India, Sikkim and Bhutan.

### **A Tibetan Home**

Sandu Chhang had sent a telegram to his brothers in Lhasa about the approximate date of my arrival there. So one of them had come to the suburban town to receive me and take me to his house, where I lived as a guest during my stay in the Tibetan capital. In a very few hours our mules delivered us safely at their doorstep.

The very sight of the house created in me a very favorable impression about the family which owned and lived in it. It was indeed a splendid building in many ways. My gracious hosts were very wealthy and important people, and their house did them credit in fitting measure. It was a spacious building tastefully put together. The whole place exuded an air of cleanliness and carefully managed orderliness. The floor was of highly polished fine wood. The decorative and ornamental aspect reflected Tibetan concepts. The numerous sofas and tables gave me the same impression. I learned to use chopsticks, if not the elegant manner of their use, during the first few days of my stay.

Tradition and convention seemed to have dictated every aspect of life and custom in that place. So I was surprised to encounter a modern, English-speaking woman in that house. Directly in the wake of that meeting, came the startling revelation about her being the sole wife of the four brothers. Those were things that Sandu Chhang had never mentioned to me. The explanations soon followed. She was educated in a Roman Catholic convent school in Kalimpong. Her father was a very wealthy Tibetan by the name of Reding Chhang. Many men like him, I was told, were accustomed to send their children, both male and female, to Kalimpong for a modern education.

My hostess spoke excellent English very fluently and that proved a great help, for I spoke no Tibetan at all. She had one daughter. I soon realized that she spoke quite freely and frankly about personal matters. I was, needless to say, eager to learn about local customs, manners and habits. By and by I made bold to inquire whether her being married to four brothers living together in the same house did not create problems. "No" was her prompt and emphatic reply, and it was patently evident she meant what she said. She explained that not only was there no trouble on that score, but was equally true of all other domestic and financial matters also. Total amity and peace prevailed in their home, she concluded, and theirs was a very harmonious and well-adjusted existence. She went on to elaborate that such a state of affairs had actually helped to make her an absolutely impartial wife, who was also capable of dispensing affection in equal measure to all her four husbands. It was her belief that the practice of polyandry in fact made the wife possess a very large and caring heart.

Practices in matrimonial matters fell into two broad categories in Tibet. Usually a few brothers took a single wife between the lot of them. In that case, they all lived together in their own house. But there were instances of a young woman marrying a single man, and then taking him away from his own house to live with her. Such a husband was known as *magpa*.

I was also curious to know whether, in the case of a single wife belonging to several brothers, some kind of mutual understanding between the husbands existed about particular days or specified time for visiting the wife. I was told, there was no such understanding. The actual practice was quite uncomplicated. The husband who was with her at any particular time left his footwear outside her door, so that in the event of any other husband of her unwittingly choosing the same time to pay a visit to her, turned back at the sight of the footwear and automatically decided to await a more proper and opportune occasion for the purpose he had in mind. Trouble on that score was virtually non-existent, I was assured.

I took complete rest for a whole week after reaching Lhasa. I was really in a great hurry to explore the city, but at the same time I needed a brief period of respite from all hard exertion and stress. I had to recapture my normal poise and also recover from the ill effects of the bruises and bumps I had collected on the way.

Once I had regained some of my usual vigour and my wonted high spirits had returned to me, I decided against wasting any more time pottering around in the house. I was directly up and

about, impatient to get around and find out for myself all that I could about the land and its people. Some 30,000 of Tibet's population of 3,000,000 lived in the relatively small city of Lhasa. Right in the center stood a large monastery, which was renowned for its many monuments of historical and religious importance. The main street encircled the monastery. It was known as Barkor. Traders had their shops and business premises on either side of the main street. I soon discovered that almost all merchants and business people were Nepalese Newars except for a small number of Chinese Muslims. I spoke to some Newars, whose shops bore striking Tibetan names, which assumed considerable significance, because customers were wont to associate those names with the traders themselves and the merchandise they vended. There were wholesalers and retailers among them. I also came across a number of Newar artisans and craftsmen in Lhasa. Many such groups had their own occupation-related designations. For instance, the goldsmiths were known as *senchoke*. Goods like cloth and building materials were bought in large quantities in India by the merchants' agents in Kalimpong, before they were dispatched to Lhasa by mule caravans. I reckoned that there must have been 1,000 Newars in Lhasa at the time.

To begin with, I experienced a little difficulty in getting accustomed to Tibetan food. Barley was grown on a large scale in Tibet, and the staple diet consisted of *tsampa*, which was mixed with Tibetan tea and then kneaded into a ball. Very little paddy, vegetables and wheat were grown there. Rice tended to be confined to the table of rich people, perhaps because it had to be imported from distant India along with a few varieties of dried vegetables. Very small- scale cultivation of potatoes, besides

lettuce and spinach helped to a limited extent. Most Tibetans favored the consumption in substantial quantities of yak meat, and milk and butter obtained from the same animal. Sun dried yak meat was powdered and mixed with *tsampa* and Tibetan tea to lend variety to the daily diet. Many Tibetans had cultivated a taste for noodles imported from China, and also spaghetti and macaroni supplied by other foreign countries.

The most popular alcoholic drink was chang. It was made by fermenting millet, and drunk from tall bamboo tumblers. Reed straw helped in the process. Considered only a mildly intoxicating drink, chang was positively more potent than beer.

A few Newar businessmen suggested that I join them in their occupation. They told me that they preferred Newars to Tibetans. The latter, in their opinion, were not quite suitable for the purpose. I thanked them for the offer, but declined nonetheless. As at all time, I was totally disinclined to pursue trade and commerce for a living. My abiding interest lay in the field of education and teaching. That being the case, it was natural that I should soon take up English tuition as a part-time occupation. It was equally predictable that the seven-year-old daughter of the family should become my first pupil. Incidentally, her mother was around 40 at the time. It struck me as remarkable that she bore only one child to her four husbands. However, I knew better than to ask her why that was so. The eldest brother was about 65 and the youngest in the region of 45. My student Sandu Chhang belonged somewhere in between and was 50 or thereabouts, I guessed.



A few Newar pupils also received instruction from me. The youngest among them was 15 and the oldest 60. I did not collect any fees from them, but I was soon very well compensated for that sacrifice on my part. At the time of my leaving Lhasa some of the Newar merchants, a few of whom were my students, made a handsome gift of a purse which was worth all of 20,000 Indian rupees.

### **The Newars in Lhasa**

It was rarely that a Newar woman travelled to Tibet. Customarily, Newar traders took Tibetan women for wives. Sons born as a result of such alliances were treated as Nepalese, while the daughters became Tibetan, who, as a rule, laid more store by female issues.

It was the usual practice among Newar merchants who went to Tibet in pursuance of their vocation to stay there for a minimum period of three years. If, at the end of that period, a trader chose to return to Nepal, one of his brothers replaced him at his station in Tibet. Few Tibetan wives accompanied their Newar husbands to Nepal.

The practice of polyandry rendered the female the more important section in the gender context and mothers constituted the fulcrum in most parental and familial contexts. As a result, all official records and application forms for all purposes provided a column for particulars about the concerned person's female parent, and there was no mention in them of the male parent.

It gave me a lot of satisfaction and real pleasure to find that Newar culture remained intact in

Lhasa. Religio-social customs in their tradition-sanctioned manner were scrupulously observed by the community. That does not, however, imply that there was absolutely no Tibetan influence at all in their performance. It would have been strange if that were to be the case. The gratifying thing was that it did not bring about any serious distortion of the basic character of cultural and religious traits, which the Newar traders and a few other people belonging to the community had taken with them at the time of their migration to Tibet a long time ago.

One of the most pronounced instances of Tibetan influence was the manner in which names of Newar owned businesses and *guthi* (religious and social associations) belonging to them had assumed typical Tibetan nomenclatures to proclaim their presence. Mani Harsha Jyoti's business house in Lhasa, for instance, was known by the name "Syamukapu." Another Newar's shop bore the legend "Ghorshya."

The Newar custom of making the *guthi* the religio-social caste based center of each sect in a particular place was very much in evidence. Only the *guthi* was known by the name *pala*. Jhwalapala, Ghorshyapala, Kunpala and Mupala were some of the names that come readily to mind. Mupala was the *guthi* of the Bajracharya<sup>1</sup> of Lhasa who also had a priest belonging to their caste to attend to their traditional needs in all matters. Incidentally, their *guthi* was given the place of pride as the first and foremost among all such associations. All-important Newar festivals like Dashain<sup>2</sup> and Tihar<sup>3</sup> were regularly celebrated in strict accordance with traditional practices.

Tibet owed its religious awakening and commercial growth to the Newars. The first Newar to go to Tibet was Simhasarathabahu. There is no historical record but ample proof of other kinds establish the fact. In any case the event took place before history came to be recorded in writing. His statue stands proudly to this day on the main street in Lhasa. He travelled widely in Tibet accompanied by a large entourage of traders and other companions. His statues are found in some places he visited including Champaling.

After returning home, he settled down in Thamel and his statue is found in the monastery there, known as Thambahi.<sup>4</sup> He is believed to have been the actual ruler of the region where he lived. He has also been credited with divinity by his followers then and ever since. Among Newars he is known as Chakandyo, something like a minor deity. Elaborate ceremonies and a procession mark the day set apart each year to commemorate his glory and fame.

## **Religion in Tibet**

Some of the specially renowned Buddhist monasteries (*gumba* to the Tibetans) I visited were Sera, Drepung and Ganden. There were monasteries everywhere and it would not be a wild exaggeration to suggest that there were more lama or monks in Tibet than laymen.

Before the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Tibet did not have any clearly defined religion or organized forms of religious tradition. A cult approximating to it served the purpose instead. It was known as Bonpo, which possibly had some affinity and relationship to one or more of the better known animist persuasion that

supplied the spiritual need of several peoples in different and widely scattered regions of the world. But most of such Tibetan traditions of that past era remain far too obscure and ill defined to help create a fairly accurate picture of the customs and concepts of the period.

Srongtsan-Gampo<sup>5</sup> was a great and illustrious king of Tibet. He was loved and respected by all his subjects, for it was he who brought about suitable reforms in social and religious matters. King Amsuvarma, the Lichhavi<sup>6</sup> king of Kathmandu, gave his daughter Bhrikuti in marriage to the monarch in 598 A.D. It is believed that by doing so, he expected his daughter Princess Bhrikuti to popularise and spread Buddhism in Tibet. A large number of Buddhist bronzes, representing the various Buddhas and Tantric *siddha* and many books formed a part of the dowry King Amsuvarma gave his daughter.

The princess did not belie her father's hopes, for she was instrumental in doing all that he had hoped she would do. There are many icons of Tara, as the Princess Bhrikuti is also called, to be found in a monastery she built on Barkor street in Lhasa. She also built many monasteries. King Srongtsan-Gampo also married a Chinese princess.

It was sometime towards the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century or early the following century that some Bajracharyas of Kathmandu took their religion to Tibet. Till then Tibetans had rejected out of hand all earlier attempts to introduce institutionalized religion into their midst. It is reliably known that there were a few such instances, when strangers arrived on the Tibetan scene from time to time with the hope of persuading the local people to accept their respective

faiths. Perhaps one of the main reasons for the failure of all such attempts was the Tibetans' refusal to accept creeds that tended to lay down a strict code of morals and ethics, while stigmatising certain concepts and practices as improper and unacceptable. All approaches based upon the "You shall" or "You shall not" attitude in defining vice and virtue and propriety and impriority had met with unrelenting denial.

The Newar Buddhist team that arrived in Tibet had brought with them totally different ideas and the methods they intended to employ were equally novel. This sect of Buddhism, known as Bajrayana, believed in a much more liberal and even ambivalent view of moral and religious matters. Strict conventional concepts were given up, for rigidity did not find a place in their own notions of practice and precept. That in fact had much to do with the success their mission met with in the propagation of their faith among Tibetans. The Bajracharya collected a few Tibetans around them and treated them as the nucleus of the future congregation of Lhasa. They told them at the very outset that their faith did not lay down inviolable rules and strict regulations about habits and customs. Sex and consumption of alcoholic beverages were matters which called for a very careful scheme of things.

The new creed preached and practised a religious persuasion, which laid emphasis on the principle of "acceptance" of most things, as opposed to their "rejection" out of hand. It sought to inculcate the belief that nothing need necessarily be intrinsically or basically wholly bad. What could be bad, on the other hand, was the manner in which things were done, and the method involved in the

practice of customs. So also with the use to which all things were put. From there, they went on to teach that all things had some meaning or purpose, or in other words, few things were totally devoid of meaning or purpose. The bottom line was, Bajrayana believed it was best to encourage people to arrive at their own conclusion about all such matters, by using their own discretion and reasoning in ways they deemed fit and right. Tibetans for the first time encountered preceptors and principles that found favour with them. Acceptance and espousal followed soon, in good measure.

It was after such careful ground preparation had been completed that Suratbajra,<sup>7</sup> a Bajracharya preacher of Asan Tol in Kathmandu belonging to Tachebaha monastery, decided to take up the work in earnest in Tibet. He was also a Tantric. Subsequently, his efforts bore much fruit, and the results came quite quickly, too.

The brand of Buddhist religion that those Nepalese preachers took to Tibet insisted that it was more a philosophy and a way of life than conventional religion, which insisted upon the observance of clearly defined principles, falling within certain parameters, dealing with beliefs and practices, morals and scruples, as also value sets of unyielding quality.

The artistic and cultural aspects of this creed showed in sharp relief those principles and beliefs. They focussed attention on cardinal concepts. As a result, the art forms and artifacts related to it became an intrinsic part of its development and history through the ages. The Tibetan paintings on cloth dealing with concepts, known as *paubha* or *thanka*



illustrate this aspect quite vividly. Bronzes, sculpture, architecture and pottery bear testimony to this. Some such art objects are greatly valued possessions, and they fetch very high prices when they are offered for sale in the open market.

This new faith in Tibet which came to be called Nyngmapa quickly struck firm roots and spread rapidly. Monasteries soon made their appearance in many places and lamas grew equally fast in numbers. Cultural and religious expression found the medium of art and sculpture most suitable, something that explains the superlative quality of the products. The lamas and Newars in Tibet always maintained most cordial and close ties in all matters. The Tibetan tradition of the spiritual leader and temporal ruler merging into the same individual was born. Besides, all such rulers were also lamas. The present Dalai Lama is the 14<sup>th</sup> reincarnation of the first one of that name. The Panchan Lama is also an almost equally important personage, cast in much the same mould.

Every year the lamas took over the reins of government on two occasions. That kind of rule was known as Monlam. In December, the lamas ruled for 21 days, and in February 11 days. The lamas elected an executive body for the purpose, and it was called the Thengbu. They collected all levies due to the state during those days and utilized the proceeds for the maintenance of the monasteries. The Thengbu maintained liaison during those two periods with the government departments and the municipality known as the Mhepung.

In the 12th century a famous Nepalese architect by the name of Arniko travelled to Tibet and to China. It was Arniko who introduced Nepalese

architecture in Tibet. He travelled to China accompanied by several Tibetan lamas. He was received by Kublai Khan at his gorgeous court in Peking. Arniko popularized the Nepalese pagoda and *chaitya* style of construction in China. In course of time several hundred Newar traders went to Tibet and settled down there and even as they prospered, they also helped Tibetan trade and commerce to grow. Their sons born as a result of their marriage to Tibetan women were Nepalese only in name for they adopted the Tibetan way of life and customs in preference to their Nepalese counterpart.

The most loathsome thing I came across in Tibet was the beastly nature of the punishment meted out to culprits. They were stripped naked and paraded on the streets and whipped brutally before large crowds of people.

Four distinct practices were prevalent in the matter of the disposal of dead bodies. The corpses of the very rich were cremated by lamas. Those who had died of infectious diseases like smallpox were buried. Some corpses were thrown by the riverside, where they raised a terrible stench for days, while huge vultures feasted on the rotting carcasses. Generally dead bodies were taken to the desert and chopped up into small parts with swords. It was a gruesome sight to behold! Large vultures ate bits of flesh scattered in the desert. A small piece of the brain was preserved by the dead one's kith and kin.

In Lhasa, during the fall of 1951, Dashain was celebrated by the Nepalese community with much enthusiasm. I took the initiative in inviting to the function not only representatives of the Indian and Nepalese governments but also a few Chinese officials. Just as my infrequent visits to the Chinese

offices had been mainly of a social and personal nature, and never really political in character, the presence of diverse, and even disparate groups among the guests, served to emphasize the festive mood of all participants and the social nature of the function. Goodwill and friendliness prevailed all through the gathering. There was little evidence of political feelings, and less of ill will on that count. It proved in all ways to be a social gathering, celebrating a national festival in a foreign country. That was the way we had planned it and all of us had an excellent reason to congratulate ourselves that it had worked out so well.

That however cannot be said of the meeting I called at the Chyanjalinka, a public park in Lhasa. It was to give expression to our pleasure and relief at the fall of the Rana regime in Nepal. That was also in 1951. It was a political gathering that publicly welcomed the salutary effect of the development and openly rejoiced in it. King Tribhuvan's photograph, a pretty large and impressive likeness of the monarch, was prominently displayed high above the rostrum. I addressed the assembly of some 1,000 people. That was by no means a small gathering in far off Lhasa. My speech, I recall with much pleasure and genuine contentment, was very well received, and I was loudly cheered at the conclusion of the meeting. It was truly gratifying that all Newar merchants in the Tibetan capital extended their whole-hearted cooperation in organizing and conducting the meeting.

Nain Bahadur Khatri was Nepal's political agent in Lhasa at the time. Naturally he received a full report on the goings on for which I was directly responsible. It was equally predictable that he should be displeased. So it was not all surprising that I

should be summoned to explain my action. When I got to his office, he seemed greatly upset and gave me a thorough dressing down. I escaped more severe punishment for the simple reason that Khatri's potential for greater mischief was already much reduced, due to the collapse of the regime in Kathmandu, which had nominated him to the post in Lhasa. I was lucky.

When the time for my return to Nepal approached, I made a very sensible and logical decision. My intense dislike and total distrust of the mule are already well known to all readers. This time I determined to avoid the ordeal of riding one and bought a small horse to carry me on its back on the long and arduous trek. It cost me just around 300 Indian rupees. It turned out to be a good bargain and the right decision, too. For, not only did my mount cause me no alarm on my return journey but it also fetched me a small financial profit when I sold it for the tidy sum of 1,000 Indian rupees at Kalimpong.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Priests and scholars who occupy the highest position in the caste hierarchy of Buddhist Newars.
- <sup>2</sup> One of the important festivals lasting for a fortnight which comes in September-October. It is called Mohani in Newari.
- <sup>3</sup> A five-day long festival, it is called Swanti in Newari and comes a fortnight after Dashain.
- <sup>4</sup> Literally, it is a monastery in the northern part of the old Kathmandu city.
- <sup>5</sup> In the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D
- <sup>6</sup> The ancestors of the Newars who settled early in the Kathmandu valley.
- <sup>7</sup> A famous Buddhist scholar who was very well versed in the esoteric doctrine of Tantra, belonging to the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

# A TRADE FAIR IN TIBET

Harshamuni Shakya

*Harshamuni Shakya (1934 -) is a businessman who spent some years in Tibet in the 1950's. He is Chairman of Baudha Yuba Samuha, a Buddhist association in Kathmandu.*

*This is an adaptation from an article in English first published in **Buddhist Himalaya** (Vol. IV, No. 1 & 1) in 1992.*

JAMPALING was the name of a famous monastery in central Tibet dedicated to the Buddha of the future, Arya Maitreya Bodhisattva. Also commonly called Champaling, it was located near Dranang at a distance of three days' journey south-east of Lhasa. Architecturally it was unique, because it appeared like a huge stupa, 12 stories tall, each story having a height of 12 feet. There were 15 staircases from the bottom to the top of the stupa, which soared almost 100 feet from the ground.

Besides the principal image of the Buddha of the future on the ground floor, there were magnificent images of Chakrasambhara<sup>1</sup> and Arya Amoghpaśa Lokeshvara<sup>2</sup> on the first and second floors respectively. On the third floor there was a golden image of Buddha Shakyamuni. Many other images were to be found elsewhere. Most beautiful thanka and frescos decorated the walls, and, in common with other monasteries, a large number of scriptures written in gold and silver and wrapped in

yellow cloth were available for the five dozen monks who lived in the monastery.

Jampaling was also famous for an annual fair. There was a belief that the fair was first begun by Simhasarathabahu (Tib. Norbu Sangya) in whose honour there stood a shrine, embellished in true Newari artistic style, in the grounds near the monastery. Simhasarathabahu was none other than the Chakandyo of the Newars, who established trade links with Tibet, and whose story is related in detail in Guna Karanda Vyuhā Sutra and Mani Bka'bum. An ancient vihara located at Thamel in Kathmandu was built by the merchant prince and an annual festival is held even today to celebrate his return from Tibet.

The Newar sahu (merchants) and their banja (assistants) from Lhasa arrived at Jampaling several days ahead of the fair. Tibetans also came in large numbers from far and near. These included the nomads and tribals from the border areas – the Silingba, Sechuanba, Soko Khamba, Amdo, Tsangba, Toyeba, Golakha, Abuhakongba, and the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages of Chitisho, Tanang and Gyali, famed as weavers of *nambu*, a narrow strip of white woollen material. Almost all the *nambu* produced by them were bought by the Newar merchants, who had it dyed maroon by the Ranjitkars, the Newar dyers, and re-sold to the Tibetans to make their long-lasting dress. The Newars themselves brought to the fair gold and silver in powder form, of which they had a monopoly since none others were able to make the same, as well as many other items of merchandise. There was a great demand for gold and silver powders, which Tibetan and Chinese artists turned into liquid and used in



their religious or secular works. The nomads and tribals came with different produce from the plains or the fields of their respective regions.

The fair took place in July or August, during the sixth Tibetan month, i.e., in Shrawan, the fourth Nepalese month, beginning on *pratipada*, the first day of the waxing moon, and came to a close on *astami*, the eighth day. It commenced with an assembly of all the Newars at the monastery and an offering of a *pata*, a long narrow strip of cloth measuring 360 *ku* (arm length) or a total of 540 feet, which was tied to the top of the stupa and allowed to fall down to the ground. The ritual over, the men went round the monastery three times, some of them playing musical instruments. The chief of the Newar community then announced that the fair could begin. The *pata* was eventually torn to shreds and made into wicks to burn in the butter lamps in the monastery. The monks got enough wicks for a whole year.

At the end of the brisk trading activities at Jampaling, while the nomads and others prepared to leave for their respective places, the Newars made a pilgrimage to the village of Chitisho to pay their homage to Bajravira Mahakala,<sup>3</sup> in whose honour they had constructed a temple. After the usual ceremonies, the Newars had a feast together with the offsprings from their Tibetan wives, who normally lived in Tibet itself. The fair and festival having come to a successful conclusion, the merchants and their assistants made their way back, taking with them the goods they had bought, to resume their normal business in Lhasa.

Before too long a heavy rain washed away all the traces left by the men from different parts of

Tibet and Nepal, effectively cleaning the area around the monastery of the Buddha of the future. The monastery itself has gone now. It was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> A deity of the Bajrayana tradition in the Buddhist pantheon.
- <sup>2</sup> One of the many names by which the Buddhist God of Compassion is known .
- <sup>3</sup> A protective deity, whose special concern is the preservation of the Buddha's teaching.

# SYAMUKAPU - A RECOLLECTION

Manikratna Kansakar

*Manikratna . Kansakar (1933- ) is a businessman who began working with the reputed firm of Syamukapu in Kathmandu, Calcutta, Kalimpong and Lhasa. Beginning in 1953, he visited Lhasa several times, and retired in 1985, after which he founded his own business house in Kathmandu.*

*This is a translation of an article in the Newari language that appeared first in a publication entitled **Maniharsha Jyoti Smritigrantha (In Memory of Maniharsha Jyoti, 1917-1993)**, edited by Phanindra Ratna Bajracharya, 1995.*

“SYAMUKAPU” meant a “White Cap” in Tibetan language. It is a nickname given by Tibetans to the sahu or merchant Bhajuratna Kansakar of Takhachen at Kel Tol in Kathmandu, because he always wore a typical white cap. In course of time the name was extended to the firm, Sahu Bhajuratna Maniharshajyoti, General Merchants and Dealers in Tibetan and Nepalese Brass and Copper Pots and Wares, at Guhekothe, the house named after the goddess Guheswari,<sup>1</sup> at 10<sup>th</sup> Mile in Kalimpong, Darjeeling district, India. The name Syamukapu was well- known from Kalimpong to Lhasa, and those who were associated with it were treated with respect everywhere.

Following a great fire at Kel Tol in 1918 in which Bhajuratna Sahu had lost almost everything except his house, he had gone to Kalimpong in 1923

and opened a shop in which he sold household utensils made in his own workshop by a few men. The business slowly prospered, due to his integrity and hard work, and as his three sons-Maniharsha Jyoti, Gyan Jyoti and Dev Jyoti – grew up, they helped in the business, which expanded by leaps and bounds. Besides the shop and warehouses at Kalimpong, an office was opened in Calcutta, and in Tibet there were three shops in Lhasa and offices or agents at Yatung, Phari, Shigatse and Kuti with the staff recruited from Kathmandu. Syamukapu not only traded in various goods but also acted as forwarding agents for other merchants of Kathmandu, Calcutta, Kalimpong and Lhasa.

My father having worked for Bhajuratna Sahu for some time, I began my career in 1947 at Takhachen in Kathmandu itself. Later, I was sent to Kalimpong where Gyan Jyoti Sahu was looking after the business while Maniharsha Sahu was stationed in Calcutta as the head of another firm, Jyoti Brothers. I was given the task of keeping accounts. In keeping with tradition, the New Year began on Mhapuja,<sup>2</sup> which usually fell in October, and the accounts were kept in our own Newari language.

Years later, in 1953, at the age of 20, I went to Lhasa for the first time. The auspicious day for departure was Vijayadashmi, the tenth day of the Mohani festival, and we left Takhachen after a ceremonial farewell, complete with the traditional sagam offering consisting of hard-boiled eggs, fish and bean cake as well as a sip of *aela*, the rice wine of the Newars, and a small cup of yoghurt. That day we stayed overnight in another house in Kathmandu itself, because the time of our flight by Indian Airlines to the India city of Patna was past. The next

day we flew to Patna and then took the train to Kalimpong in north east India.

There were altogether 11 men in the party and Dev Jyoti Sahu was the thakali or the leader of the party. He was also the chief of the establishment in Lhasa. His brother Gyan Jyoti also went as thakali in course of time. Once, it was my privilege to be the thakali at the Syamukapu establishment in Lhasa.

After a few days at Kalimpong, a car took us to Gyantok. In addition to the merchandise for sale in Lhasa, we had with us warm clothes, woollen blankets and beddings as well as provisions for the journey. From Gyantok onwards, we had horses to ride and mules to carry our baggage and merchandise. At Nathu La pass, we came across ice, and it was all downhill to Yatung, where Syamukapu had a house of its own. At Phari, our next stop, we had also our own place and from there onwards, we were accompanied by experienced horsemen called *theba* to guide and guard us all the way to Lhasa.

As snow fell thick and wind blew fiercely, we left our lodgings very early in the morning, but sometimes it would be late just to avoid the inclement weather. Our stops also took place early or late in the afternoon for the same reason. Our staple food- rice was no longer available in the different places we stopped, but we had carried our own supply from Kalimpong. Sometimes we just ate *baji*, the parched rice that need not be cooked. The local people subsisted on barley.

At one place called Jhara, the hills rose high and steep between the highway. It was a dangerous place to travel as highwaymen lurked in caves and

fell upon hapless travellers. The theba held their guns at the ready all the way and fortunately not only then but also on two subsequent journeys we did not encounter the highwaymen.

The banja or assistants from Syamukapu in Lhasa along with a number of other people were waiting for us when we arrived at the outskirts of the city. They offered us khata scarfs and refreshments, after which we walked towards the city. We passed through a huge gate and found ourselves below the Dalai Lama's Potala palace. We soon came to a big stupa, where we were given another ceremonial welcome. We were then escorted to a house, where we paid homage to the gods and we had tea to drink. Finally we were taken to Jhyalinchokam on the main street called Barkor, where Syamukapu had its shop.

We had left Kathmandu at the end of Mohani festival and we found ourselves in Lhasa just after the festival of Swanti. We were taken to pay our homage to the gods of Chusinsyapala, one of several societies called pala, to which Syamukapu belonged. Immediately after that we settled down to our business. There were a dozen banja from Nepal and half a dozen local men and women in the establishment working in various capacities. Beginning with the sale of utensils, the shop later on kept silk, woollen cloth and nylon textile in its counters. The business prospered and many other items-provisions, soap, cigarettes, watches, cameras, etc.- were sold in the shop.

The houses and the streets reminded one of Kathmandu itself. There was a big *bahi* or *vihara* built by the Nepalese themselves in the central part of the city, which was known as Barkor, from where



streets led in different directions. Almost all Newar shops were located in this main street. There were also some shops owned by the Khachara, the progeny of Newar men and Tibetan women; Muslims and Khambas. The Syamukapu building was located quite close to the *bahi*, and from the terrace one could also look down at the courtyard of the police station next door. Criminals were often to be seen in the middle of the street, stripped of their clothes, bound with a rope and whipped. Those who had committed heinous crimes were made a spectacle with the head sticking out of a hole in a big plank

The Barkor was a very busy place, specially in the morning and in the evening with large crowds going around the *bahi*. Some men prostrated themselves full length on the ground while others just turned their prayer wheels and uttered the prayer, *Om Mane Padme Hum*.

There was a remarkable annual celebration called Monlam, which lasted three weeks. It occurred in March or April and the administration of the city passed into the hands of the monks of the Shakya monastery. Tall and big in their bulky clothes, the monks walked up and down the streets of Lhasa, some of them carrying big sticks. During the period the lamas expected the streets to be clean and the drains in a state of repair. If there was garbage in the street or a drain was found spreading a stench, a monk would just stand there and beat the ground with his big stick. The owner of the house, in front of which the lama was standing, then had to approach him and beg to be forgiven and pay a fine. The street in front of Syamukapu was always kept clean and there was no occasion when a fine had to be paid.

Even women had to be presentable, neat and clean and their hair done in a braid.

Another interesting event was a festival, in which people vied with one another in presenting lavish decorative designs made of butter hanging from poles planted in the streets. In the evening the streets were brightly lit and a large number of people came to look at the beautiful scene.

Then there was an occasion in August when new prayer flags appeared everywhere and a procession went round the city carrying various images of gods.

After some years in Lhasa, I was transferred to Calcutta, where I worked in the office of Jyoti Brothers at 4 Ramjidas Jetia Lane. It was my job to forward goods from Calcutta to Lhasa.

Just before the General Elections in Nepal in 1959, I returned to Kathmandu. A year and half later, I was back in Lhasa. The war between the Tibetans and the Chinese had come to an end. The Dalai Lama had sought asylum in India and the Chinese ruled in Lhasa.

In the meanwhile, another firm had been established in Kathmandu. It was called Bhajuratna Investment. Its office was at Pyukha and Dev Jyoti Sahu was in charge of it. The new company imported goods from foreign countries and also undertook contracts in Nepal.

My last visit to Lhasa was with Rup Jypti Sahu, the grandson of Sahu Bhajuratna. There was now no need to go to Kalimpong. A highway had

been built from Lhasa down to the border with Nepal, and the Arniko highway from the border to Kathmandu had already opened. Syamukapu sent the merchandise in trucks to Tatopani from where it was transferred to other trucks and taken to Lhasa via Kuti. In Lhasa itself, I found a great many changes. The streets where the merchants from Nepal had lived and traded for so long had completely changed.

My long association with three generations-Sahu Bhajuratna; his sons, Maniharsha Jyoti, Dev Jyoti and Gyan Jyoti; and grandsons, Padma Jyoti and Rup Jyoti – came to a happy conclusion when I retired in 1985 with many memories of my days with Syamukapu.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> One of the goddesses of the Buddhist pantheon, often simply represented by a *kalas* or water jar.
- <sup>2</sup> Literally the worship of the body, it is the New Year's Day of the Newars.

# RETURN TO LHASA

Kuldharna Ratna Tuladhar,  
M.A.(Com.), B.L.

*Kuldharna Ratna Tuladhar (1918-) is a businessman who joined an old family establishment in Lhasa in 1943. In 1948, he accompanied the Tibetan Trade Delegation to the United States as an interpreter.*

*This is a translation of an article in the Newari language that appeared first in a Kathmandu monthly, **Thaunkanhe** (Year 41, No. 74) in 1993.*

IN 1943, I first went to Lhasa via Kodari, in the footsteps of my forefathers, who had long ago established a business house in the Tibetan capital. I had just then passed my examination in M. A. (Com.) and B.L. in Calcutta. Having lived in Calcutta during the terrifying days of World War II, I found Lhasa was actually a land of the gods, as it was named, for *Iha* meant god and *sa* was land or earth. A legend has it that the mountain goat (*rha*) carried earth when the city was built. Hence, originally it was known as Rhasa and later corrupted to Lhasa. The Tibetans then were very religious-minded and simple people.

The principle temples and monasteries in Lhasa were built by Nepalese architects, as Ranjana<sup>1</sup> script inscriptions found in these buildings amply prove. There was a very good relation between Nepal and Tibet in those days and official permit was not required for the peoples to visit one another's country. The Newars were respectfully called *agula*

(uncle) by the Tibetans, a further proof of the amity between them. Besides the religious link, the relation was strengthened early in history by the marriage of Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti with King Srongtsan-Gampo of Tibet. The Newar merchants were addressed as *sotala* a word denoting the owner of merchandise, because all the shops in Barkor, the main street of Lhasa, were owned by them. They took to Lhasa all kinds of goods required by the Tibetans from Nepal and India, to which countries they also sent the goods produced in Tibet. There was no trade restriction of any kind and Lhasa might be said to have indeed seen a “golden age” in those days.

What I saw and experienced during my visits to Lhasa amply corroborated the emphasis laid by the Vipassana<sup>2</sup> teacher Kalyanmitra Goenka that “everything is subject to constant change.” In 1943, it took me seven days to reach Kuti (Nyalam) on foot and 20 days more on horseback to arrive in Lhasa via Shakya and Shigatse. It was a very arduous journey as the road lay across mountains, which, in some places reached above the clouds. The Brahmaputra river was crossed in boats decorated with a wooden horse head.

The journey in 1986 via Kuti and Shigatse by car from Khasa took only three days to Lhasa, and a steamer took me across the Brahmaputra. I was then leading a trade delegation of the Nepal Chamber of Commerce. Although I rode horseback for three weeks in 1943, when I was just 25 years old, I had not found it much difficult, except for a sore bottom and cold hands and feet. The high altitude did not pose a problem. In 1986, I got air sick at Shigatse (alt. 17,000 ft.) and I had to inhale oxygen. On my third visit in 1992 in connection with the opening of a

Nepalese trade fair, in my capacity as a member of a delegation representing various organizations- Trade Promotion Center, Nepal Chamber of Commerce, Trans-Himalaya Trade Association and the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry- I travelled in an airplane, and the distance between Kathmandu and Lhasa was covered in no time at all. There was no problem during the flight but arriving at the hotel after an hour and half ride in a car, I fainted, only to revive after the administration of artificial breathing and oxygen. The doctor's fee and medicine cost me about Rs.1,800/- and I had to pay Rs.1,300/- more at the hospital for a further check up. I found that a Newar had to pay six times more than a Tibetan for treatment in the government hospital.

On September 2, 1992, I went to Lhasa again by plane, but suffered no air sickness, except for a shortness of breath when climbing or walking fast. There was no problem if I went slowly. Perhaps, it was due to acclimatization after a week's stay at Khasa in July 1992 prior to my departure for Lhasa.

I noticed a vast difference between the old and new Lhasa. Until 1986, the Tibetan word for Newars was Bhayabu, now it has become Nepali. The Newars were exempt from payment of entrance fees at the monasteries and viharas. Now they have to pay about Rs.120/- to visit these places or the Potala palace.

As we had a shop of our own in 1943, there was no need to stay in a hotel. Now even a very moderate hotel charged about Rs.300/- daily for a bedroom for two. Previously there were Newar shops all around the main street of Barkor; only four or five

shops are left now. If a shop in existence since the earliest times was closed once for some reason, it was not allowed to be reopened. There was no question at all of new traders getting permission to open a shop, although the authorities say, "The door is open. You are welcome." No permission is given to own any premises.

A passport is required to engage in trade with the official corporations in Lhasa, in addition to a visa from the Chinese government, which is not easy to get. If a visa is given at all, it is good for only one entry. It is necessary to reapply if the visa has to be revalidated. The visa fee is Rs.50/-

Having known Lhasa from 1943 to 1950, when there was no need for passport and visa, and having engaged freely in trade from our own establishment and visited the monasteries and viharas at one's own sweet will without payment of any fee, I was shocked by the changed conditions in Lhasa.

Although the street and houses in Barkor may be said to be in the same condition, many of the houses are being torn down and replaced by new buildings. Many big buildings are coming up beyond Barkor. The streets are being widened and given a black top. The means of transport prior to 1943, such as horse, mule, ass and yak have given way to rickshaw, motor cycle, cycle, hand cart, car, tractor, truck, etc. Of course, there is an aeroplane too, as mentioned earlier.

The population of Lhasa has increased too; there are more people from outside than those who are native to it. The dress has also changed. The traditional garments have given place to coats,



trousers, jackets and skirts. The hairstyle has changed; short hair is the fashion now. Salt-and-butter tea has been replaced by tea with sugar. Beer has replaced chang as the popular drink. The staple food, tsampa, is hardly eaten in Tibetan homes. Whereas in the old days, monks were always engaged in religious activities in the monasteries and homes, now they are seen chanting and begging on the roads and outside restaurants.

The modern trend that has overtaken Lhasa was amply demonstrated by disco dances and fashion shows arranged after the trade fair by the official trading corporation in honour of the Nepalese delegates. It was a grand affair and one wondered whether it didn't outshine a similar show in Paris. The different dresses presented by beautiful, young models were based on traditional dresses worn by different peoples in various provinces of Tibet, yet there was a distinct modern touch that underscored the fact that Lhasa is no longer what it was before.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> An ancient script of Nepal.
- <sup>2</sup> A technique of meditation based on the essence of Buddhist teaching preserved for centuries in Burma and revived and spread world-wide by Kalyanmitra Satya Narayan Goenka since the early 1970's.

# GLOSSARY

(Hin.= Hindi; Nep.= Nepali; New.= Newari;  
Tib.= Tibetan; Sans. = Sanskrit)

aela –	New. rice wine.
agula-	Tib. uncle
astami –	Sans. the eighth day of the lunar fortnight
bahi –	New. Buddhist monastery
baji –	New. parched and flattened rice.
banja –	New. merchant's assistant; a small trader.
bhajan –	Hin. religious song.
bhulaya –	New. a kind of raw silk cloth.
chaitya –	New. a dome-shaped Buddhist temple
chang –	Tib. a drink of fermented grain.
dharma –	Sans. religion; duty; Buddhadharma, the teaching of the Buddha.
diksha –	Sans. instruction or initiation into a religious practice.
gaine –	Nep. a fiddler by caste, who wanders about with his instrument and sings in order to beg.
gelong –	Tib. monk
gese –	Tib. monk scholar or teacher
gesela –	Tib. honorable teacher or scholar
ghee –	Nep. clarified butter.
gheghela -	Tib. respectable teacher
gumba –	Tib. monastery
guru –	Sans. teacher
guthi –	New. a social or religious organization
gyakar –	Tib. Indian
kalas -	New. a holy water jar
kayata –	New. loincloth
khachara –	New. progeny of Newar man and Tibetan woman

khata –	Tib. ceremonial scarf
khayama –	Tib. muleteer
khukri –	Nep. a common heavy knife.
kothi –	New. a business establishment or shop.
kudrug –	Tib. nobleman
ku –	New. an arm's length
la –	Tib. suffix denoting honorable or respectable
lama –	Tib. Tibetan monk
lha –	Tib. god
lung –	Tib. an initiation for monkhood.
magpa –	Tib. a man who lives with his wife in her natal home.
mandala –	Sans. a symbolic diagramme that illustrates religious ideas.
mantra –	Sans. a charm; Sanskrit words or syllables used to express the quintessence of energy and uttered to conjure good and often ill effects.
mohar –	Nep. an obsolete silver coin worth half a rupee.
nambu –	Tib. a kind of thick woollen cloth.
na-Newa –	New. A Newar man who went to Tibet for the first time.
nayabhu –	Tib. chief porter
nechan –	Tib. a lodging for the night
nirvana –	Sans. the attainment of absolute peace and happiness, the final liberation or goal sought in Buddhism.
norbu –	Tib. jewel
pagoda –	a temple with a single or multiple sloping roofs.
pala –	New. a social or religious organization of the Newars in Tibet, similar to the guthi in Nepal.
pala aju –	New. the guardian deity of a pala.

pata –	New. a long narrow strip of cloth tied to the pinnacle of a temple and reaching to the bottom or farther away, as an offering to the diety enshrined therein.
paubha –	New. a scroll of cloth depicting gods or religious designs; same as thanka.
pho –	Tib. a religious service conducted after a person's death.
pratipada –	Sans. the first day of the lunar fortnight.
raga –	Sans. one of the six main sets or arrangement of sounds in patterns in the classical system of music.
sagam –	New. an offering of boiled eggs, fried dry fish, curd and kidney bean cakes made at the time of departures, birthdays and other happy occasions.
sahu –	New. merchant, used both as prefix and suffix to a name, or separately. A Newar is often called a sahu by other peoples in Nepal.
senchoke –	Tib. a goldsmith.
sho –	Tib. a dice-like game
siddha –	Sans. An accomplished person; a holy man.
sotala –	Tib. the honourable or respected merchant.
stupa –	New. a dome-shaped Buddhist temple; same as chaitya
syame –	Tib. a boat with a wooden horse head at the prow.
tabla –	Hin. a pair of hand drums played by both hands.
tantric –	Sans. a tantra master, who practices the esoteric doctrine of tantra.
thakali –	New. the senior-most member or an elder in a family or community.

thanka –	Tib. a scroll of cloth depicting gods or religious designs; same as paubha.
theba –	Tib. horseman
thom –	New. a drink of fermented grain, like chang.
tsampa –	Tib. barley flour, the staple food in Tibet.
ulkanti –	Sans. a religious service performed after the death of a person; same as pho.
vihara –	Sans. Buddhist monastery.
wang –	Tib. an initiation or instruction for Buddhist monks and nuns in the Tibetan tradition.
yoga –	Sans. mental and physical exercise for spiritual development.

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## THE NEWAR MERCHANTS IN LHASA

The merchants of Nepal have surmounted great geographical barriers and endured climatic rigours for centuries in the past to play an important role in trans-Himalayan trade and cultural and religious exchanges. In effect, they have contributed much to enrich the life of the peoples in this part of Asia. In this book Kesar Lall has brought together for the first time the most interesting travel accounts and experiences of some of these enterprising men, about whom so little is known until now.

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